

ESCAPE 2 BANGKOK

MEN NOW GONE WILDER

ISHAN DWIVEDI



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
NewDelhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Ishan Dwivedi 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRose ONE^{com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7825-534-2

Cover design: Aafiya Saifi

Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: September 2026

Preface

Every journey begins with a single step. But sometimes, the destination changes us so profoundly that returning to where we started is no longer possible.

Escape to Goa introduced readers to four lifelong friends—Amit, Ankit, Rajesh, and Sandeep—ordinary men bound by extraordinary friendship. Burdened by careers, marriages, responsibilities, and the quiet monotony of middle age, they sought a temporary escape from reality. What began as an annual vacation soon evolved into a journey filled with temptation, deception, unexpected consequences, and life-altering choices. Beneath the vibrant beaches and dazzling nightlife of Goa lay a deeper story about friendship, morality, redemption, and the search for purpose.

But every ending leaves behind unanswered questions.

Can a man truly leave his past behind?

Can one mistake redefine an entire life?

Can love emerge from the most unlikely circumstances?

And most importantly, can an escape ever become a path toward self-discovery?

Escape 2 Bangkok picks up where those questions begin.

This time, the familiar shores of Goa are replaced by the dazzling skyline of Bangkok—a city that thrives on contrasts.

Beneath its glittering nightlife, magnificent temples, bustling street markets, and endless energy lies another world where desire and destiny often collide. For Amit and his friends, Bangkok is not merely another holiday destination. It becomes a mirror reflecting their fears, regrets, ambitions, and the consequences of choices they believed they had already left behind.

As the story unfolds, readers will discover that this journey is larger, more emotional, and far more unpredictable than the one before. New friendships will be forged, loyalties will be tested, hidden truths will surface, and every character will be forced to confront the person they have become. What once seemed like a search for excitement gradually transforms into a search for identity, forgiveness, and inner peace.

While this novel continues the adventures of familiar faces, it also explores universal themes that resonate with every reader—the conflict between responsibility and freedom, the burden of guilt, the healing power of friendship, and the realization that true happiness cannot be found by escaping life, but by learning to embrace it.

Although *Escape 2 Bangkok* is a sequel, it also stands on its own as a compelling story of adventure, emotion, suspense, romance, and personal transformation. Readers who journeyed through *Escape to Goa* will witness how far these characters have come, while new readers will find themselves immersed in a world where every decision

carries consequences and every destination changes the traveler.

The streets of Bangkok are waiting.

Some journeys begin with a passport.

The unforgettable ones begin with a choice.

Welcome to **Escape 2 Bangkok**.

Contents

The Itch Returns	1
Alibis & Lies 2.0.....	19
Welcome to Sin City	30
Old Bonds, New Temptations.....	41
Trouble in Paradise.....	50
Ananya's Echo	60
The Deal Gone Wrong.....	67
The Girl Named Lila	77
Redemption Or Relapse?.....	87
Homebound and Humbled.....	96
What Happens in Bangkok... ..	105
Epilogue: The Calendar Whispered Vietnam	116

The Itch Returns

It had been a year since Goa—a year since they had returned from something that had felt dangerously close to paradise, back into lives that were, at best, politely crumbling at the edges. The tan had long faded, erased by routine and fluorescent office lighting. The laughter, once loud enough to spill into strangers' conversations, now lingered only in memory—faint, flickering, and increasingly out of reach.

That WhatsApp group, once a relentless stream of memes, drunken selfies, and profane promises made under the influence of cheap alcohol and borrowed courage, had fallen eerily silent. Messages no longer piled over each other. No one fought for the last word anymore. It simply... rested. As if even chaos had grown tired.

A lot had shifted in the group's dynamics too—quietly, almost imperceptibly at first. The men who once worked out of the same office, the same building, now found themselves scattered across different parts of the city, buried under new roles and responsibilities that demanded more than they were willing to give. Daily cigarette and tea breaks—their sacred ritual—had slowly thinned into weekly, then fortnightly obligations. Meetings that required planning. Conversations that needed catching up.

Even the group name had changed. Ankit, in a moment of what he probably considered maturity, had renamed it from “Goa Sinners 2024” to the painfully uninspired “*Weekly Check-in.*” A name that felt, to all of them, like both a punishment and a quiet, reluctant prayer.

Ankit had slipped back into his old rhythm with unsettling ease—leading review meetings, chasing sales targets that felt increasingly hollow with each passing quarter. His days blurred into spreadsheets, office gossip, and a rehearsed enthusiasm for product launches he didn’t quite believe in anymore. And yet, Goa persisted. It showed up uninvited in the dead hours past midnight, when sleep refused to come and the world fell silent. That was when he would scroll through old photos, pausing longer than necessary—laughing softly at Rajesh’s absurd red Hawaiian shirt or Sandeep’s half-conscious pose at Curlies, frozen somewhere between joy and collapse.

Rajesh, as expected, had returned to his marital routine with the quiet resignation of a man who knew the shape of his cage and had learned, over time, how to decorate it well. He was back to budgeting household expenses with clinical precision, running errands for his mother-in-law, and sitting through IPL nights with his son, performing enthusiasm like a well-practiced role. The reckless spark that Goa had briefly lit in his eyes had dimmed again—reduced to a tired, familiar flicker.

Sandeep’s life had folded in on itself in its own exhausting way. Parent-teacher meetings, school WhatsApp groups,

and long conversations about “emotional regulation” after screen time had replaced everything that once resembled spontaneity. His days were structured, supervised, and subtly suffocating. His wife kept a watchful hold on him—tighter, he often thought, than any leash he had noticed at that chaotic bachelorette party at the Baga shack.

But it was Amit whose life had shifted in ways none of them could have anticipated.

They didn’t know.

Not yet.



After Goa, while the others quietly reburied their fantasies beneath deadlines and diapers, Amit carried something back with him—Ananya. Not in any tangible sense, not in a way the world could see or question, but in the quiet, persistent corners of his mind. She stayed.

They had kept in touch.

What had begun as a fleeting, one-time connection on a beach—careless, impulsive, almost forgettable—had deepened without either of them quite noticing when the shift happened. Conversations stretched longer. Messages grew more deliberate. What was once casual turned thoughtful, then intimate, and somewhere along the way, undeniably dangerous.

She wasn’t what he had expected. Not even close. She wasn’t just an escort he could neatly file away as a mistake

or an indulgence. She was fiercely intelligent, with a dark, cutting sense of humor and an unsettling ability to read between silences. She asked him questions no one had thought to ask in years—questions his wife never did, or perhaps had stopped doing a long time ago. And when he answered, she listened. Not out of obligation, not out of routine, but with a kind of attention that felt almost disarming.

Somewhere in that exchange—slow, unguarded, and increasingly necessary—he had started to fall. Or at least, that’s what it felt like.

Maybe it wasn’t love. Maybe it was something far less noble—escapism dressed up as connection, loneliness disguised as longing. But whatever it was, it held him.

What began as messages soon turned into voice notes, his voice softer at night, more honest than it had any right to be. Then came the video calls—late, stolen hours where the distance between them seemed irrelevant. And with each step forward came something else too, something heavier—guilt, carefully wrapped and quietly ignored.

Until the day it unraveled.

His wife had picked up his phone casually, the way she always did, to check on a Swiggy order. There had been no suspicion, no tension leading up to it. Just a habit. Routine.

And then the notification appeared.

“Ananya: *‘You looked tired today. Want to talk before bed?’*”

It didn’t take much after that.

The world didn't explode the way he might have imagined it would. There were no raised voices, no accusations thrown across the room. No dramatic confrontation to mark the moment.

Just a look.

Cold. Hollow. Final.

And then silence.

It stretched across days, filling the house in ways noise never could. It settled into the walls, into the spaces between them, into the things left unsaid. A week later, she packed two bags with a kind of quiet efficiency that felt more devastating than anger ever could have been. She left for her parents' place, taking their daughter with her—and with them, every trace of warmth that had once made the house feel like home.

They are separated now. Not divorced—at least not officially. On paper, nothing had changed. He was still a husband. Still a father.

But in reality, his home had hollowed out into something unrecognizable.

The worst part was, he hadn't told the others.

He couldn't.

They all had their secrets, their compromises, their carefully buried truths. But this... this felt different. This wasn't a skeleton tucked away in a closet. It was an entire

graveyard, impossible to contain, impossible to explain without exposing everything.

So when they asked why he had grown quieter in the group, Amit gave them what they could accept.

“Work stress.”

“Too many deadlines.”

“Just tired.”

What he didn’t say was that his bedroom was empty now, that meals had become solitary rituals, and that the silence he once craved had turned into something punishing, almost unbearable.

Every day, almost out of habit, he would open WhatsApp and scroll through Ananya’s old messages. He would pause at her display picture—a blurred photograph of a sunset, maybe taken somewhere in Hampi, indistinct and distant, much like everything she had become.

She hadn’t texted in two weeks.

Maybe she had moved on. Maybe she had simply returned to a life where he was never meant to belong. Maybe this—this absence—was the correction he deserved.

And yet, a part of him still waited. Still longed for her. And despised itself for it.

He kept telling himself that Goa had been a mistake—that everything that followed had been inevitable once that line was crossed. But deep down, he knew better.

Goa hadn't been the mistake.

It had been the mirror.

And now, with Bangkok looming on the horizon—a new escape, a fresh temptation—he found himself standing at the edge of something familiar, something dangerous.

Could he resist this time?

He didn't know. And the others had no idea just how broken he really was.

At least not yet.



It began, like all dangerous ideas do, with a joke that didn't feel like one when it landed.

Ankit:

Remember the Russian bar in Baga? Where Rajesh thought the vodka was water?

For a moment, Amit just stared at the notification without opening it. The group had been quiet for so long that any message felt out of place, like hearing a familiar voice in a room you had already learned to sit alone in. He opened it anyway.

Rajesh replied within two minutes.

Rajesh:

Don't remind me. I blacked out before the dancers even arrived.

Amit let out a faint breath through his nose. Of course he did. Rajesh always blacked out before the part everyone else

remembered. Some things didn't change, even when everything else did.

Sandeep jumped in next.

Sandeep:

Bro, I saw a Russian dance bar here in Malad. Pathetic. They serve chicken lollipops and call it "exotic."

Amit could almost hear the tone in his head, that half-mocking, half-serious way Sandeep spoke when he wanted attention but didn't want to admit it. His thumb hovered over the keyboard for a moment, the impulse to respond rising out of habit more than intent, but he let it pass. He kept reading instead, letting the conversation unfold without him.

Ankit:

Time to do something reckless again?

The message sat there longer than the others had. No one replied immediately this time. Amit found himself waiting, eyes still on the screen, like the answer would somehow decide something for him.

For a few seconds, no one did.

Then the emojis began to appear, one after the other, filling the silence in the only way they knew how—fire, airplane, beer mugs, a devil face, and then a banana that no one acknowledged but everyone noticed. Amit found himself staring at it longer than he should have, a faint, involuntary smile appearing before he could stop it.

It was strange how easily the tone shifted, how quickly something dormant could feel alive again. A part of him recognised it immediately, the same pull that had led them into Goa, the same casual beginning that never really stayed casual.

He locked his phone and placed it beside him. The silence in the room returned instantly, heavier than before, like it had been waiting for its turn. For a few seconds, he just sat there, doing nothing, letting the quiet settle back in.

Another trip.

The thought didn't excite him the way it should have. It didn't even feel like an idea yet. It felt like something dangerous trying to look harmless.

Goa had started exactly like this. A joke. A plan that wasn't supposed to matter. And then somehow it had become something else, something that had followed him back and refused to stay there.

He lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. There was a small crack running across it that he had noticed weeks ago and never bothered to fix. His eyes followed it absentmindedly, like it might lead somewhere if he looked long enough.

There was still a faint trace of his daughter's shampoo in the air. He noticed it more now, in the quiet, when there was nothing else to distract him from it. It wasn't strong, but it was enough to remind him of what the room used to feel like. During the day, there were distractions—calls,

emails, the kind of noise that filled space without meaning anything. But at night, everything settled. The smell stayed. Soft, familiar and so unfair.

He turned his head slightly. Her toys were still in the corner, exactly where she had left them. A plastic doll lying on its side, a small stuffed animal leaning against the wall. He had thought about putting them away once. Just once. But he hadn't been able to do it.

It felt like erasing something he didn't have the right to erase.

His phone buzzed again. He ignored it for a few seconds before picking it up.

More messages had come in.

Ankit:

Sandeep's suggesting Bangkok.

Sandeep:

Bro, Thailand is next-level. Beach, booze, and things we can't type here.

Rajesh:

I've always wanted to ride a tuk-tuk to sin.

Amit let out a quiet breath, something between a scoff and a sigh.

Sandeep:

You rode a cab to regret in Goa.

He almost smiled at that.

Almost.

The conversation had picked up pace now, the kind that didn't pause to check who was keeping up and who wasn't. Amit scrolled through it slowly, not really reacting, just taking it in.

Then his name appeared.

Rajesh:

Amit, what say?

His name on the screen felt heavier than it should have.

He didn't reply. He locked the phone again and placed it beside him, but this time he didn't look away. It stayed there, within reach, like it was waiting for him to come back.

What say?

What was he supposed to say?

That he couldn't afford another mistake like Goa? That he had already crossed a line he didn't even know how to step back from? That his wife had looked at him like he was someone she didn't recognize anymore, and that look hadn't left him since?

He ran a hand over his face, pressing his fingers into his eyes for a second.

His wife's face came back to him without warning.

Not the way she used to look at him before, but the way she had looked at him that day. That quiet, hollow expression

that had replaced everything else. He remembered the exact moment, the exact message that had caused it.

It had been such a small thing. A simple notification. And that was all it took. He could still see it clearly, like it had happened this morning instead of weeks ago.

“Ananya: *‘You looked tired today. Want to talk before bed?’”*

He had been in the same room. Just a few feet away busy with something he can’t remember now but that’s beside the point. It had seemed like nothing when it appeared on his screen. Just another message in a long chain of messages that had slowly blurred into something more than what they were supposed to be.

But in her hands, in that moment, it had meant everything.

He exhaled slowly, pressing his fingers against his forehead for a second, as if that might interrupt the memory before it went further.

Three hours passed like that, though he didn’t keep track of them. Time moved differently when he wasn’t doing anything, when he was just sitting with thoughts he couldn’t settle.

Every time he tried to decide, his mind went somewhere else. First to his daughter, then to the empty dining table, to the way the house sounded now when he walked through it.

At some point, he reached for his phone again. The chat was still active. It seemed they had already started planning.

He typed, paused, erased, then typed again.

Amit:

We're not kids anymore.

He sent it before he could overthink it.

Almost immediately, Sandeep replied.

Sandeep:

Exactly. We're dying slowly in middle-class respectability. That's why we need one last madness.

Amit let out a dry laugh under his breath.

One last.

He had heard that before. They all had. It never really meant what it sounded like.

Ankit followed.

Ankit:

One last. Just us. Then we grow up, promise.

Amit read that line and felt something tighten slightly in his chest, though he couldn't quite explain why. He wondered, not for the first time, what that even meant anymore. Because from where he was standing, it didn't feel like something you chose. It felt like something that happened to you, whether you were ready or not.

He looked around the room again—the stillness, the absence that had become familiar in a way he hadn't chosen. And then, almost without thinking too much about it, he started typing again.

Amit:

Okay. I'm in.

His thumb hovered over the send button for a second. He knew this is stupid. Knew where this leads and what happened last time.

He pressed send anyway.

The responses came instantly—excitement, jokes, plans gaining momentum again—but he didn't read through all of them this time. He locked the phone and set it aside. Something didn't feel right.

The decision didn't feel like relief. It didn't feel like excitement either. Just a quiet, cold feeling sitting somewhere deep in his chest, like he had just agreed to something he wouldn't be able to walk away from later.

This time, it was Bangkok.

He said the name in his head once, just to hear how it sounded.

It didn't feel like Goa.

Goa had been easy. Careless in a way that made it forgivable. You could blame the alcohol, the atmosphere, the moment. Bangkok didn't feel like something you could blame on anything else. It felt like stepping into something dangerous with his eyes open and still choosing not to look too closely.

He picked up his phone again later that night and scrolled through the messages.

“Operation BKK.”

Of course Ankit had renamed the group.

There were documents, lists, options being discussed with a seriousness that made the trip feel more real than it had earlier.

Rajesh had made a whole comparison chart for Airbnb options. Amit scrolled past it, barely registering the details, just noticing the effort. The way Rajesh had written “near nightlife” instead of anything more direct made him shake his head slightly.

Sandeep, on the other hand, had no such hesitation. Links to clubs, bars, massage parlours. Comments that made it clear he had already imagined half the trip in his head. There was even a “Bangkok Bucket List.”

Amit read through a few of the points.

- See ping pong show.
- Try edible insects, maybe.

He read the lines without reacting, then closed the chat.

The next few days passed the same way.

Messages came, plans grew. He responded when he had to. He responded when needed, keeping things brief, neutral, just enough to avoid standing out. No one questioned it. They assumed he would fall into it the way he had last time.

Like Goa.

He sat on the edge of his bed one evening, his phone in his hand, the chat open but unread for a few minutes.

He could tell them. The thought came without warning. He could just type it out and say that things had changed. That his wife had left and that he wasn't in the same place anymore.

His thumb hovered over the keyboard.

He imagined the responses before they even came—the pause, the concern, the shift in tone. The way everything would suddenly become serious.

He didn't want that. He didn't want to see that shift. So, he locked the phone again.

Some things were easier left unsaid.

He stood up almost mechanically and walked to the cupboard, pulling out a travel bag he hadn't touched since Goa. It still carried a faint memory of that trip—creased at the edges, slightly dusty, like it had been waiting without expecting to be used again. He placed it on the bed and stood there for a moment, staring at it longer than necessary, as if the bag might offer him some clarity, some last-minute excuse to not go through with this.

The question came back, clearer this time, louder because there was nothing else in the room to drown it out.

Why are you going?

He didn't answer. Not because he didn't want to, but because every answer that came to his mind felt incomplete, like it was hiding something behind it.

Nothing made sense anymore. Maybe he wanted to feel something different for a few days. Maybe he wanted to forget the way the house felt when he came back to it every evening. Or maybe he just didn't want to sit here and think.

He picked up a shirt and folded it slowly, placing it inside the bag.

One thing at a time.

Halfway through it, he sat down on the edge of the bed, the half-packed bag in front of him, and ran his hand through his hair, exhaling slowly. This wasn't about Bangkok anymore. It wasn't even about the trip.

It was about not wanting to sit in this version of his life and admit that he didn't know how to fix it.

He resumed packing, adding the remaining clothes without overthinking each piece this time, as if the act itself was enough to keep his mind from spiralling further. When he was done, he zipped the bag halfway and stopped, his hand resting on the zipper.

For a brief second, he thought of his daughter again—of how she would have sat on the bed watching him, asking where he was going, whether he would bring something back for her. The image came so clearly that he had to close his eyes for a moment.

“I’ll get you something,” he murmured under his breath, not even sure why he said it, or who he was saying it to.

The room didn’t respond.

It never did.

But he didn’t think too much.

He would just go, stay out of trouble, enjoy and come back. He exhaled quietly, almost like he was convincing himself.

Amit looked at his bag packed with denial. It was lightweight and easy to carry. He thought about the other. They all had their reasons for going in some way or the other.

Ankit needed another story to survive his dead marriage, Rajesh wanted to feel dangerous again before he turned fifty, Sandeep just needed to breathe without being interrupted by a toddler.

And Amit? He didn’t know anymore.

Maybe it was redemption. Maybe it was punishment.

Or maybe he just didn’t want to be alone.

Alibis & Lies 2.0

The real challenge had never been the bookings, and somewhere deep down, all of them knew it.

Flights could be secured in a matter of minutes, hotels compared and confirmed with the ease of habit, and money—money always found a way to rearrange itself when the promise of escape felt urgent enough. Those were mechanical decisions, almost comforting in their predictability. What unsettled them, what demanded a different kind of attention altogether, was the quiet, deliberate act of constructing a life that could continue in their absence without raising suspicion.

Because leaving, they were beginning to understand, was never just about distance. It was about continuity. About ensuring that the version of themselves that stayed behind felt believable enough to withstand questions, to survive doubt, to exist without cracking under the weight of curiosity.

Goa had been their rehearsal, though none of them had called it that at the time. Back then, the lies had been lighter, almost playful in their carelessness. They had assumed that intention alone would carry them through. It hadn't. A misplaced photograph, a careless privacy setting, a moment of drunken oversight—small things, but enough to expose how fragile their stories really were. That memory

lingered now, not as a joke but as a quiet warning none of them needed to voice.

Bangkok felt different. The distance alone demanded a higher level of precision, as though crossing a border required them to become more convincing versions of themselves. This was no longer about getting away; it was about doing so without leaving behind anything that could follow them.

Ankit approached the situation the way he approached most things in his life—with structure, discipline, and a need to feel in control. He did not merely tell his wife about a leadership workshop in Singapore; he built it, piece by piece, until it felt tangible. The Asia-Pacific division of his company became the host. The schedule took shape across a carefully designed Canva template. Names were invented, roles assigned, topics layered with enough complexity to discourage further questioning.

He spent longer than necessary refining the language, adjusting phrases until they sounded sufficiently important and sufficiently vague at the same time. When he finally typed out “Transforming Agile Synergies in Post-Covid Retail Landscapes,” he paused, reading it again with a faint, private satisfaction. It sounded authoritative in the way corporate language often did—dense, impressive, and just obscure enough to prevent anyone from asking what it actually meant.

For Ankit, the lie was not just about deception. It was about performance. About convincing himself that if he built it well enough, it would hold.

Rajesh, on the other hand, found himself gravitating toward something that felt closer to reality. His lie needed familiarity to survive. A cousin's wedding in Bangkok—small, intimate, unavoidable. It was the kind of obligation that could not easily be dismissed, the kind that carried emotional weight without inviting too many logistical questions.

And yet, when he told his wife, he saw the hesitation immediately. It appeared in the slight narrowing of her eyes, in the way she repeated the location as if testing its plausibility.

“In Bangkok?”

The question lingered longer than he expected, forcing him to step into the version of himself he had rehearsed but never fully trusted. He responded carefully, letting a trace of fatigue soften his tone, as though he were explaining something obvious rather than defending something fragile.

“She met him in Canada,” he said, allowing the explanation to unfold slowly. “You know how these NRI weddings are.”

He held her gaze, resisting the urge to elaborate further. Too many details would betray him. Too few would make him seem evasive. It was a delicate balance, one he had

practiced alone, standing in front of a mirror, adjusting his expressions until they felt natural enough to pass unnoticed.

Even so, a part of him remained aware of the performance, aware of how easily it could falter if pushed just a little further.

Sandeep chose a different approach entirely, one that relied less on explanation and more on redirection. He understood instinctively that suspicion could be softened if attention was guided elsewhere, and so he built his lie around generosity.

The timing worked in his favor. His in-laws were visiting, and instead of treating it as an obstacle, he transformed it into an opportunity. He suggested a pilgrimage to Shirdi, presenting it not as an excuse but as an offering. He booked everything himself—tickets, transport, even a comfortable stay at a spiritual retreat—ensuring that every detail reflected thoughtfulness.

It was difficult to question a gesture that appeared so selfless.

There was, however, a condition he could not escape. Daily video calls. Five minutes every night, just enough to confirm his presence, just enough to ensure that the illusion remained intact.

He dismissed it with a casual confidence, laughing it off in front of the others, but somewhere beneath that ease was an awareness of the risk. A misstep, a background noise, a

poorly chosen corner—and the entire story could unravel in seconds.

And then there was Amit.

Amit did not need to construct anything.

There was no one at home waiting to question his absence, no one expecting an explanation detailed enough to hold. When he spoke about his situation, he kept it deliberately vague, offering just enough to satisfy curiosity without inviting sympathy.

“A temporary break,” he had called it. “Things got a little tense.”

The others accepted it without probing further, perhaps because it fit neatly into what they already believed about marriage—that it bent, that it stretched, that it survived periods of distance. They did not ask what that distance looked like in reality.

They did not see the way his phone remained silent longer than it should have. They did not know that his wife had blocked him, cutting off even the possibility of a conversation. They did not notice how carefully he avoided mentioning his daughter, how he compressed an entire relationship into a single, passing reference to weekends.

And they certainly did not know about the nights.

The nights when the house felt too quiet, too still, as if it were holding its breath around him. The nights when he found himself scrolling back to Ananya’s last message, reading it not because it offered comfort, but because it was

the only thing that felt unfinished. He read it the way one returns to a question that has no answer, hoping that repetition might somehow change the meaning.

So when the others spoke about their plans, their strategies, their carefully constructed lies, Amit listened. He nodded when expected, contributed when necessary, but never allowed himself to linger in the conversation long enough to be seen clearly.

His deception existed on a different plane.

It was not about hiding his destination.

It was about hiding the emptiness that made the journey necessary in the first place.

The disruption came quietly, almost without warning, slipping into the rhythm they had built as if it had always been waiting for the right moment.

Rajesh's message appeared on the group chat one morning, brief and unsettling in its simplicity.

He might have to pull out.

For a few seconds, the words seemed to suspend everything else. The jokes stopped. The anticipation paused. Even the certainty they had been building began to feel fragile.

When he explained, the situation sounded serious enough to justify hesitation. His son had been suspended. There was a meeting with the principal scheduled for Friday.

They were supposed to leave on Thursday.

The timing felt almost cruel in its precision, as if the choice had been designed to test him.

Suggestions followed quickly, each one attempting to preserve the plan while bending reality just enough to make it work. Delay the trip. Shift the flights. Invent an excuse. Avoid the meeting altogether. The solutions came from a place of urgency, but none of them addressed what Rajesh was actually feeling.

Because beneath the logistics was something far less straightforward.

Rajesh was afraid.

Not just of his wife's reaction or the consequences at school, but of what stepping onto that flight would say about him. He had always seen himself as dependable, as someone who showed up when it mattered. Goa had been an exception, something he could dismiss as a momentary lapse.

This felt different.

This felt deliberate.

And somewhere within that realization was the uncomfortable question he could not quite silence—what kind of father chooses to leave at a time like this?

That night, when the noise of the group chat had faded and the house had settled into its familiar quiet, Amit called him.

There was no urgency in his voice, no attempt to persuade. What he offered instead was something softer, something that did not demand agreement.

“You’ve earned this,” he said, allowing the words to settle without forcing them.

Rajesh did not respond immediately. Amit could almost hear the hesitation on the other end, the quiet weighing of something that refused to be simplified.

“And taking a few days for yourself,” Amit continued, “doesn’t erase everything else you are.”

The sentence lingered between them, incomplete in a way that made it feel more honest.

“It doesn’t make you a bad father.”

The silence that followed was longer this time, but it no longer felt uncertain. It felt like something shifting, slowly, reluctantly.

When Rajesh finally spoke, his voice carried a kind of tired acceptance, as though he had stopped arguing with himself.

“Thanks, man.”

By morning, the decision had been made.

He was coming.

The group responded exactly as expected, the tension dissolving into excitement, jokes replacing hesitation as if nothing had threatened to unravel them just hours earlier.

Only Amit remained quiet.

Because the words he had offered so easily now echoed back at him, stripped of their certainty.

He wondered, not for the first time, whether he believed them at all.



Once the decision was locked in, everything else moved quickly.

The dates were finalized—June 16 to 20—a narrow window that felt both contained and dangerously open. Flights were booked without hesitation, as though committing financially made the decision irreversible. The Airbnb was chosen with care, a sleek three-bedroom space near Sukhumvit that promised both comfort and anonymity.

Ankit, true to form, organized the trip into a structured itinerary, mapping out each day with a precision that bordered on unnecessary. Arrival, dinner at a rooftop bar, a day of indulgence, a day deliberately left undefined, time to recover, and then the return.

It gave the trip a shape, something they could point to, something that made it feel less like chaos and more like intention.

They set rules as well, half in jest, half in quiet understanding. No social media. No careless communication. No unnecessary risks.

The last rule—about not falling in love—was delivered lightly, aimed at Amit with a teasing familiarity that should have felt harmless.

But something about it lingered.

Not because of the joke itself, but because of how easily it touched something unspoken.

As the days passed, the anticipation grew louder on the surface. Their conversations returned to their usual rhythm, filled with humor, exaggeration, and the kind of energy that made the trip feel inevitable.

Yet beneath that surface, something more complicated moved quietly within each of them.

A hesitation they could not quite name.

A question they were not ready to answer.

For Amit, that question refused to stay buried.

The night before the flight, he sat alone with his suitcase open beside him, the act of packing unfolding slowly, almost mechanically. Each item folded and placed with care, as though precision could somehow quiet the restlessness building inside him.

When he finally picked up his boarding pass, he held it longer than necessary, his eyes settling on the destination.

Bangkok.

The word carried a weight he had not anticipated. It did not feel like a place. It felt like a possibility—uncertain,

unpredictable, edged with something he could not quite define.

For a moment, he tried to understand what he was hoping to find there.

Relief, perhaps. Or distraction.

Or something that would make sense of everything that no longer did.

But the truth remained just out of reach, shifting every time he tried to name it. In the end, the only certainty he could hold onto was the simplest one.

Whatever waited for him there, whatever version of himself he would have to confront, he was still going to step onto that flight.

Not because he knew what he was running toward.

But because staying where he was had already begun to feel like a different kind of loss.

Welcome to Sin City

“Sawadee kaaa, welcome to Bangkok!”

The announcement floated through the cabin, soft and melodic, but it barely registered. By the time the aircraft doors opened, the four of them were already on their feet, pulling out their bags with a restless urgency that had been building long before the flight had even taken off. This was it. Not a plan anymore, not a conversation buried in late-night chats and half-serious jokes, but something real—something that had finally arrived.

The moment their feet touched the polished floors of Suvarnabhumi Airport, the shift was immediate. It wasn't loud or dramatic, but it settled into their senses in a way that made it impossible to ignore. The greys and dull routines of Delhi and Mumbai felt far away now. Here, everything seemed to pulse with a strange, effortless energy. LED signs flickered in precise patterns, the air carried a faint mix of lemongrass and jet fuel, and the airport staff moved with a kind of quiet grace, bowing slightly in traditional silk uniforms that made even the act of passing through immigration feel curated.

Sandeep leaned in, unable to contain himself. “Is it me,” he whispered, his eyes scanning everything with barely disguised fascination, “or are even immigration officers hot here?”

Rajesh smirked, though he kept his gaze forward, pretending a composure that didn't quite hold. "You're officially thirteen again," he said, but there was no real judgment in his tone.

Ankit, who was usually the most measured among them, didn't even bother pretending. He let out a soft laugh, shaking his head as he took in the surroundings. "Welcome to Disneyland for dysfunctional men," he muttered, and for once, no one argued with him.

Only Amit lingered.

He wasn't slow, but he wasn't rushing either. His eyes moved differently, taking in details that the others skimmed past—the way people spoke, the rhythm of movement, the subtle shifts in expression. There was something about the place that felt alive in a way he couldn't quite explain, as if it wasn't just a city but a possibility waiting to unfold. The others were here for the experience. Amit, whether he admitted it or not, was here for something else.

The illusion of control lasted exactly until they stepped outside.

The moment the airport doors slid open, Bangkok hit them all at once—heat that wrapped itself around their skin, thick and unapologetic; noise that layered itself in waves, from honking cars to distant laughter; and a visual overload that felt almost aggressive in its intensity. Neon lights blinked against giant billboards advertising everything from lingerie

to Muay Thai fights, each image demanding attention, refusing to be ignored.

And then it happened.

A group of five Thai women walked past them, their heels clicking softly against the pavement, their laughter light but unmistakably confident. They spoke rapidly in Thai, their words blending into a rhythm that none of the men understood but all of them felt. There was something effortless about the way they carried themselves, something that made the moment stretch longer than it should have.

Sandeep stopped walking altogether. “Bro...” he said slowly, his voice caught somewhere between disbelief and awe, “is this real life, or did we die and go to heaven?”

Ankit exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair as if trying to steady himself. “I think I just fell in love six times in ten seconds,” he admitted, half-laughing, half-serious.

Rajesh turned his head away, attempting indifference, but his neck betrayed him, his gaze following them just a fraction too long. “You both need help,” he muttered, though his tone lacked conviction.

Even Amit looked.

He told himself it was just a glance, just a passing moment, but he knew it lingered longer than it should have. And what unsettled him wasn’t the act itself, but how easy it had been. For those few seconds, his mind had been completely empty of everything else—no past, no regret, no unanswered questions. Just this.

That ease stayed with him longer than the moment itself.

They moved toward the taxi zone, the noise and chaos of the city settling into something that no longer felt overwhelming but inviting. Their cab driver introduced himself as Toom, a wiry man with quick reflexes behind the wheel and a smile that suggested he had seen far too many tourists like them.

“First time in BKK?” he asked, glancing at them through the rearview mirror.

Sandeep nodded enthusiastically, already fumbling with his phone, trying to pick up a few Thai phrases from Google Translate. “Yes, first time,” he said, as if the answer itself carried excitement.

Toom chuckled softly, his tone shifting into something more knowing. “You want a party, yes? You want Thai massage? Girls? Ladyboys? Everything here. Just say what you like. I show.”

For a brief second, the car fell silent.

Rajesh leaned forward, his voice careful, almost defensive. “We’re here for sightseeing,” he said. “You know... temples.”

Toom’s grin widened just enough to make it clear he didn’t believe a word. “Temples also have bars,” he replied casually. “You come see.”

None of them corrected him.

Their Airbnb was exactly what they had hoped for. A sleek three-bedroom condo overlooking the Sukhumvit skyline, where the city stretched endlessly in every direction, glowing as if it had no intention of sleeping. The beds were crisp, the interiors modern, and the minibar stocked in a way that suggested the owners understood exactly why people came here.

It was Sandeep who found the basket.

He held it up, eyebrows raised, reading the small note attached to it. “Enjoy responsibly. Or don’t.” He laughed, shaking his head. “These people know their audience.”

There was a quiet excitement in the room as they unpacked, changed, and got ready, each of them moving a little faster than usual, as if afraid that slowing down might somehow break the momentum. By the time they stepped out again, it was close to eight, and the city had transformed into something sharper, more unapologetic.

Their first destination was Soi Cowboy.

The street greeted them with a blaze of pink neon, music spilling out from every direction, and an energy that felt almost confrontational in its honesty. There was no subtlety here, no attempt to disguise what it was. Girls in bikinis stood at club entrances, waving, smiling, calling out to passing tourists with a familiarity that felt both inviting and unsettling.

Sandeep stopped again, his reaction immediate. “Guys,” he said, lowering his voice slightly, “is it rude if we just... stand here and stare?”

Ankit’s grin widened, unfiltered and unapologetic. “If staring is wrong, I don’t want to be right,” he replied, already moving toward the entrance.

Inside, the atmosphere wrapped around them instantly. The music was loud enough to drown out thought, the lighting dim enough to blur edges, and the movement constant enough to make everything feel like it was happening all at once. Girls danced on poles with a confidence that felt almost hypnotic, while tourists watched with a mixture of fascination and disbelief.

They ordered Chang beers and settled into a velvet booth, the cold glass in their hands grounding them just enough to keep the moment from slipping entirely into unreality.

For a while, nothing else existed.

Deadlines, responsibilities, marriages strained by silence or routine—all of it faded into the background, replaced by something lighter, something easier.

All except for Amit.

He laughed when the others laughed, he drank when they drank, but there was a part of him that remained untouched by the noise. His mind drifted, uninvited, back to a voice he couldn’t quite shake.

“Desire is like alcohol, Amit. Sip it, and it’s sweet. Guzzle it, and it burns your soul.”

Ananya had said it casually once, almost as a joke, but the words stayed with him now in a way they hadn't before.

Tonight, he told himself, he was just sipping.

Barely.

By the time the clock edged past ten-thirty, the beers had begun to soften their edges. Laughter came easier, conversations blurred, and the night seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of them.

It was Ankit who noticed the doorway.

A purple neon sign flickered above it—*The Moon Room – Private Lounge & VIP Experience*. It looked quieter than the chaos outside, more controlled, more exclusive. A well-dressed bouncer stood at the entrance, watching them with a knowing expression.

"VIP, sir?" he said smoothly. "Champagne, private dance. Beautiful girls. Real good time."

Ankit turned to the others, his eyebrows raised in silent question. There was no real hesitation in the room, only a shared understanding of why they were here.

Rajesh smiled, the tension he had carried from home now softened into something looser. "You only live once," he said, pausing just long enough to let the words settle, "or twice, if you lie well enough at home."

Inside, the Moon Room felt like a different world altogether. The lighting was dim, almost intimate, the furniture plush and inviting. The air carried a mix of

jasmine, perfume, and something heavier—something that felt like a consequence waiting to happen.

A hostess named Ploy guided them to a corner booth, her movements smooth, practiced. She introduced her friend Namwan, whose playful smile carried a kind of mischief that needed no translation. Their dresses shimmered under the low light, catching attention without asking for it.

Champagne was poured. Conversations became quieter, closer.

Ploy leaned toward Ankit, her voice soft, teasing. “You look like a good man. Family man. Why did you come here?”

Ankit let out a small, tired laugh, something in his expression shifting just slightly. “Good men,” he said, meeting her gaze, “are usually the ones who need this the most.”

She laughed at that, but there was something in the way she looked at him afterward that suggested she understood more than she let on.

As the music slowed, movements changed, and became more deliberate. Boundaries blurred in ways that felt both thrilling and unsettling.

At some point, Ploy slipped him a small card.

“You call if you want something more... relaxing,” she said softly. “Only you. No bar, no noise.”

Ankit took it without thinking, slipping it into his pocket with a casualness that felt rehearsed, even though it wasn’t.

Across the booth, Namwan moved between Sandeep and Rajesh with effortless ease, laughter spilling freely as the absurdity of it all settled in. For a while, they let themselves forget everything else.

For forty-five minutes, reality simply stopped existing.

When they stepped out again, the night hadn't slowed.

If anything, it had deepened.

Toom was still waiting, as promised, his smile unchanged. "I take you to a special show," he said, his tone carrying quiet pride.

They followed.

Patpong Night Market buzzed outside, loud and crowded, but the place Toom led them to was tucked away behind a misleading sign that read *Traditional Thai Cultural Experience*. The irony wasn't lost on them, though none of them said it out loud.

Inside, the room was darker, more contained. A red spotlight illuminated the stage, leaving everything else in shadow.

When the performer walked in, the room fell into a strange, anticipatory silence.

What followed felt surreal.

There was skill, precision, and a kind of confidence that turned something absurd into something almost unbelievable. The crowd reacted instantly—laughter, applause, disbelief blending into one.

Ankit leaned toward Rajesh at one point, shaking his head in disbelief. “Did she just...?” he started, unable to finish the sentence.

Rajesh didn’t respond immediately, his expression caught somewhere between shock and reluctant admiration. “I don’t even know what to say,” he admitted quietly.

Sandeep looked genuinely overwhelmed, as if his brain had reached a limit it wasn’t designed to process.

And Amit—

He laughed harder than he had in months, covering his face, shaking his head.

For the first time in months, it came without hesitation, without restraint. He covered his face briefly, shaking his head, trying to make sense of what he was witnessing.

“This is either the peak of civilization,” he said finally, his voice breaking slightly with amusement, “or the absolute end of it.”

When they stumbled back onto the street close to two-thirty, the night air felt different. Not calmer, not quieter, just... heavier with everything they had experienced.

For a full minute, none of them spoke.

Then Ankit pulled out the small card Ploy had given him, looked at it for a moment longer than necessary, and slipped it back into his wallet.

“Let’s get home,” he said quietly. “Before we do something we can’t undo.”

Back at the Airbnb, they opened one last beer and sat on the balcony, the city stretching endlessly beneath them. The air carried the smell of grilled meat, humidity, and something intangible—something that felt like secrets lingering just out of reach.

They laughed again, replayed moments, exaggerated details, turning the night into a story they would carry with them long after it ended.

For now, there were no regrets. Just the comforting illusion that they had stepped outside their lives and could return unchanged. Amit leaned back in his chair, his gaze drifting upward toward the moon hanging quietly above the restless city.

For a moment, everything felt still but somewhere beneath that stillness was a thought he couldn't quite shake.

The city had seen them tonight. And cities like this had a way of remembering.

Old Bonds, New Temptations

The sun rose over Bangkok without ceremony, pushing through the thick curtains of their Airbnb as if it had done this a thousand times before for men like them—men who arrived with excitement and woke up with something heavier.

Inside the apartment, the air felt stale, thick with the residue of last night. Empty bottles sat scattered like quiet witnesses, and the faint smell of alcohol lingered stubbornly, refusing to leave. None of them woke early. There was no urgency, no plan pulling them out of bed. When they finally stirred, it was closer to afternoon, their movements slow, their heads heavy, their bodies protesting the indulgence of the night before.

By the time they stepped out, the city had softened.

Lumphini Park offered a version of Bangkok that felt almost unfamiliar compared to the chaos they had seen. The noise receded into the background, replaced by the rustle of leaves and the distant hum of traffic that no longer demanded attention. They walked without speaking much, iced coffees in hand, each of them carrying something unspoken from the night before.

The hangover wasn't just physical.

It sat deeper than that.

They found a bench under a sprawling banyan tree, its roots stretching into the ground like something ancient and unmoving. The shade offered relief, but not enough to quiet their thoughts.

For a while, none of them spoke.

Sandeep broke first.

“What if we’ve gone too far this time?”

The question didn’t sound like a joke. It didn’t carry his usual lightness. It came out slower, heavier, as if he had been turning it over in his head long before he decided to say it out loud.

Rajesh let out a short breath that almost sounded like a laugh, though it lacked humour. “There is no ‘too far’ in Bangkok,” he said, leaning back against the bench. “That’s the whole point of coming here.”

His tone was casual, but it felt rehearsed, like something he needed to believe more than something he was certain of.

Amit sat slightly apart, holding a coconut water as if it were something grounding, something steady in contrast to everything else. He hadn’t said much since morning, and even now, he didn’t respond. His mind had been elsewhere since he woke up, circling back to the same place it always did when the noise faded.

Ananya.

He hadn't meant to think about her. Not here. Not now. But the quiet had a way of bringing things back that the night had temporarily buried.

Ankit noticed the distance, the way Amit's gaze drifted somewhere beyond the park, beyond the moment. He smirked slightly, though there was curiosity behind it.

"Looks like someone had a productive night," he said, lifting his phone just enough to make his point without saying it outright. "VIP package and beyond?"

The teasing hung lightly in the air, but Amit didn't take it. He didn't even look at him.

Instead, he took a slow sip, his eyes fixed ahead, as if responding would require more energy than he was willing to give.

The silence that followed felt different this time. Not empty, but loaded. The kind that settled between people who had known each other long enough to recognize when something had shifted.

It was Rajesh who spoke next, though his voice carried an odd mix of amusement and something else he didn't fully acknowledge.

"You guys remember Shruti?" he said, glancing at them one by one. "The intern from our Mumbai office?"

Sandeep raised an eyebrow, already sensing where this was going. "Of course we remember. You couldn't stop talking about her."

Rajesh smiled faintly, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I still get dreams about her," he admitted, his tone softer now. "It's stupid, I know. I was married when I met her... hell, I still am."

He paused, letting the words settle, as if testing how they sounded outside his own head.

"And yet," he continued, almost to himself, "sometimes I wonder."

It wasn't just a memory he was sharing.

It was a thought he hadn't let go of.

No one laughed.

No one interrupted.

Because they all understood what sat beneath that statement—the quiet dissatisfaction, the curiosity, the part of him that had never quite settled into the life he had chosen.

The silence returned, but this time it felt heavier, more honest.

Old friends didn't always need explanations.

Sometimes, they just needed space for the truth to exist without being challenged.

—

By the time night fell again, the city had shifted back into its other self—the one that had drawn them in from the start.

Soi Cowboy looked even louder the second time around, its neon lights cutting through the darkness like something alive. The streets buzzed with movement, voices overlapping, music spilling out from every direction.

But something about it felt different now.

Or maybe it was them.

Inside Raw Hide, the atmosphere was familiar but sharper, as if the novelty had worn off just enough to reveal what lay beneath it.

Rajesh changed first.

It wasn't immediate, but it was noticeable.

Where he had been measured before, holding himself back just enough to maintain control, now there was an edge to him. His movements were quicker, his attention more focused, his restraint slipping in ways that didn't feel accidental.

While the others settled into their drinks, laughing at a dancer who struggled to keep rhythm on the pole, Rajesh had already moved on.

He stood near the bar, deep in conversation with one of the bartenders. It wasn't casual flirting. There was intent behind it, something deliberate in the way he leaned in, the way he spoke.

Ankit watched from a distance, a faint unease settling in.

When Rajesh returned, there was a different energy about him—something restless, something unresolved.

“You think she’d do it with both of us?” he asked quietly, nodding toward two dancers standing close together, their matching tattoos catching the light.

The question landed awkwardly.

Ankit frowned, taken aback by the bluntness of it. “That’s not what we’re here for,” he said, his voice firm but controlled.

Rajesh smiled, but it wasn’t the kind of smile that invited agreement.

“Then why are we here?” he asked.

The words lingered longer than they should have.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Ankit saw it then—not just curiosity, not just excitement, but something deeper. A need to push further, to cross a line simply because it existed. It wasn’t about the experience anymore.

It was about escape.

And not the kind that ended when the trip did.

Ankit looked away first.

Later, when he glanced back toward the entrance, he saw Rajesh leaving with both girls, his posture relaxed, his expression unreadable.

Something about it stayed with him.

Amit and Sandeep had drifted elsewhere by then, pulled toward a place that felt quieter, more controlled.

The bar they entered carried a different kind of energy. It wasn't loud or chaotic. It was polished. Intentional. The kind of place where conversations happened in low tones and everything—from the lighting to the music—felt carefully chosen.

They were seated quickly, introduced to two women whose presence felt different from what they had seen before.

There was no exaggeration in their movements, no forced charm.

Just ease.

Sandeep slipped into conversation effortlessly, his natural humour returning as the whisky warmed his system. The woman with him responded in kind, her wit sharp, her tone playful. When she called him “Uncle Handsome,” he laughed without hesitation, accepting the nickname as if it had always belonged to him.

Amit, however, found himself unsettled.

The woman sitting across from him introduced herself as Mira. Her voice was calm, her English precise, her gaze steady in a way that made him uncomfortable.

She didn't rush to fill the silence.

She simply looked at him.

“You are married?” she asked, her tone neutral, almost observational.

Amit hesitated.

“It’s... complicated,” he said finally, the words coming out slower than he expected.

Mira nodded slightly, as if she had heard that answer many times before. “It usually is,” she replied.

There was no judgment in her voice. No curiosity either. Just understanding.

And that, more than anything else, disarmed him.

She didn’t perform. She didn’t lean closer or lower her voice in practiced seduction. She simply sat with him, allowing the conversation to unfold at its own pace.

And somehow, that made him speak.

He told her about work, about the routines that had begun to feel mechanical. He mentioned his daughter in passing, careful not to linger on the details. He spoke about the silence in his apartment without realizing he was doing it.

Mira listened. Not passively, but fully.

When she reached out and touched his hand, it wasn’t dramatic. It was light, almost tentative.

Amit pulled back instinctively, the reaction immediate, unplanned.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice quieter now. “I can’t.”

Mira didn’t seem surprised.

Instead, she smiled gently, leaning back slightly, giving him space without making it feel like rejection. “Then maybe I’ll sit,” she said. “Just sit.”

And so they did.

For half an hour, neither of them spoke.

There was no pressure to fill the silence, no expectation to turn the moment into something else. It was quiet in a way that felt unfamiliar, almost fragile.

And for the first time since they had arrived in Bangkok, Amit felt something settle inside him.

It wasn’t excitement. Nor was it a distraction. What he felt was just stillness.

When they finally left, the city felt louder again, as if reminding them where they were.

Sandeep, his cheeks flushed from whisky and conversation, threw an arm around Amit’s shoulder as they walked. “That girl,” he said, shaking his head slightly, “she looked straight into your soul, bhai. You okay?”

Amit looked at him, a faint smile forming, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“I think that’s the problem,” he said quietly.

And this time, he didn’t try to explain further.

Trouble in Paradise

Bangkok had a way of stretching the night until it stopped feeling like time and started feeling like a blur—of music, of bodies, of choices made too quickly to be questioned. And somewhere inside that blur, something had shifted for all of them, even if none of them were ready to admit it yet.

For Ankit, it began with a message.

It was simple. A smirking emoji, followed by a location pin. Namwan.

The moment he saw it, something in him stirred again—that same restless energy that had followed him out of the Moon Room the previous night. It wasn't just an attraction. It was a curiosity. Intrigue perhaps. The sense that there was something unfinished between them.

“The Nest,” the location read.

The place was exactly the kind of spot that didn't appear on tourist lists. Tucked behind a narrow alley lined with neon-lit massage boards and quiet, almost secretive bars, it felt like a world within a world. The kind of place you only found if someone led you there.

When Ankit walked in, he spotted her instantly.

Namwan stood near the bar, leaning casually, sipping from a tall glass as if she had been waiting for him all along. She wasn't conventionally stunning, not in the way that demanded attention the moment she entered a room, but there was something about her—an ease, a confidence—that made it impossible to look away.

She smiled when she saw him. Not a polite smile. Not a practiced one.

The kind that felt familiar.

As if they had already crossed the distance between strangers.

They didn't waste time with small talk. The music was loud, pulsing through the space, and soon they were on the dance floor. At first, Ankit moved awkwardly, out of sync, but Namwan laughed, guiding him, teaching him steps with a patience that felt almost playful.

He loosened up.

For the first time in a long time, he stopped thinking about how he looked, about whether he was doing it right, about whether he was being watched.

He just moved.

They shouted over the music, words half-heard and half-understood, but it didn't matter. The connection wasn't in what they said. It was in how easily they slipped into each other's rhythm.

Drinks followed. Laughter grew louder. The world narrowed until it felt like it was just the two of them, suspended in a moment that didn't need explanation.

At some point, Namwan leaned closer, her voice brushing against his ear. "Come," she said softly. "My place?"

There was no hesitation.

Ankit followed.

—

Her apartment was small, but it carried a kind of deliberate intimacy. Soft lighting cast everything in shades of purple, scented candles burned quietly in the corners, and faint music played in the background—something slow, almost deliberate in its pace.

It didn't feel accidental.

It felt curated.

They sat close on the couch, the distance between them dissolving naturally, as if it had never existed. Conversation faded, replaced by something quieter, something more instinctive.

And then, in the middle of that closeness, something shifted.

It was subtle at first. A moment that didn't fit into the expectation he had carried with him.

He paused.

Looked at her.

Confusion flickered across his face before he could control it.

“Wait... is that...?” he began, the words stumbling over themselves.

Namwan didn’t flinch.

She met his gaze calmly, taking his hand gently, grounding him in the moment rather than pulling away from it.

“Yes,” she said, her voice steady. “I am... ladyboy.”

For a second, Ankit’s mind refused to process it.

He stood up abruptly, running a hand through his hair, pacing once, twice, as if movement would help him think.

“I didn’t know,” he said, more to himself than to her. “You didn’t tell me. I feel... I don’t even know what I feel.”

There was no anger in his voice.

Just confusion.

Namwan watched him quietly, her posture relaxed, her expression unchanged. “You felt good,” she said simply. “I felt good. That’s all.”

The simplicity of it caught him off guard.

No explanation. No apology.

Just the truth.

Ankit stopped pacing.

Took a breath.

And then another.

He looked at her again—not through the lens of expectation, not through the labels that rushed into his mind, but just... looked.

And something inside him settled.

“Screw it,” he said finally, the words coming out slower, steadier.

He walked back toward her.

What followed wasn’t something he could easily define.

It wasn’t just about desire. It wasn’t just about the thrill of crossing a line he had never imagined crossing. There was something else—something quieter, more unsettling.

A sense of being seen.

Not as a husband. Not as a provider. Not as the version of himself he had been performing for years.

Just as he was.

Later, when the room had fallen silent and Namwan had drifted into sleep, Ankit sat on the floor, his back against the wall, staring at nothing in particular.

The city hummed outside—distant, yet unrelenting, a steady reminder that the world moved on regardless.

Inside his head, though, nothing settled.

Questions lingered, circling without resolution.

What did this mean?

Was it attraction, curiosity, or simply loneliness?

Did it define him?

And more importantly—did he even want it to?

He ran a hand over his face, exhaling slowly, as if trying to steady something that refused to be contained.

For the first time in years, he didn't fully recognize himself.

And strangely, that unfamiliarity didn't feel entirely wrong.



The next morning—or what passed for morning—the four of them gathered in the hotel lounge, each carrying their own version of exhaustion.

Sandeep clutched an iced coffee like it was keeping him alive.

Rajesh wore sunglasses indoors, leaning back as if the light itself was offensive.

Amit looked different. Quieter. Paler.

For a while, they fell into familiar patterns—half-hearted jokes, fragmented conversations—but it didn't take long for the surface to crack.

Amit cleared his throat.

“Guys... I need to say something.”

Something in his tone made them all pause.

Sandeep looked up first. Rajesh slowly removed his sunglasses. Ankit, still holding his coffee, watched him more closely than usual.

“It’s about Ananya,” Amit began, his voice steady at first, though there was tension beneath it. “The girl from Goa.”

He exhaled, as if releasing something he had been holding onto for too long.

“We stayed in touch,” he admitted. “At first, it was nothing. Just messages. Casual. But then it became... more.”

The words came slower now, heavier.

“My wife saw the chats,” he continued. “She didn’t fight. She didn’t shout. She just... left.”

Silence.

Real silence.

“She moved out,” Amit said, his voice tightening slightly. “Took my daughter. We’re separated now. Not divorced, but... it’s bad.”

Sandeep’s grip on his coffee tightened.

Rajesh leaned forward slightly, his expression shifting from curiosity to something more serious.

“I meet my kid in the food courts,” Amit added, almost as an afterthought. “I lied to my in-laws. I haven’t told anyone. Until now.”

The weight of it settled between them, not as judgment but as something far heavier... the quiet, undeniable presence of reality.

Rajesh spoke first, though his tone was softer than usual. “I’m not judging,” he said carefully, “but... was it worth it?”

Amit didn't respond immediately.

Sandeep followed, more gently. "You still have a family, yaar. Can't you just end it and try to fix things?"

Amit looked up, his eyes carrying something raw now. "You think I haven't tried?" he asked quietly. "It wasn't just a fling. I felt something. And I can't just switch that off."

No one had an answer to that.

Rajesh leaned back, exhaling slowly. "You should've told us," he said. "At least we would've been there."

Sandeep nodded. "We're idiots, but we're your idiots," he added. "You don't have to carry this alone."

Amit let out a faint, tired smile. "I know," he said. "I just... needed to say it out loud."

For the first time since they had arrived, something real had entered the room.

And it changed everything.

Ankit had been quiet throughout, his fingers wrapped tightly around his cup, his mind somewhere else entirely.

"Guys..." he said finally, his voice lower now. "I've got something too."

They looked at him.

He took a breath.

"Last night... I met Namwan again," he began. "We went out. It was good. Really good."

Rajesh smirked faintly. "Go on."

Ankit didn't smile.

"We got close," he continued. "And then I found out... she's a ladyboy."

The reaction was immediate.

Sandeep blinked in disbelief. Rajesh sat up straighter. Amit froze.

"You didn't know?" Sandeep asked.

Ankit shook his head. "Not until it was already happening," he admitted. "And even then... I didn't stop."

The room went still.

"I thought I would," he added. "But I didn't. And the weird part is... I didn't want to."

He paused, searching for the right words, failing to find them.

"I don't know what that says about me," he said finally. "I don't know if it means anything. Or everything."

No one spoke.

Because there was nothing easy to say.

Rajesh ran a hand through his hair. "That's... a lot," he muttered.

Sandeep looked genuinely lost for words.

Amit, despite everything he had just shared, seemed equally shaken.

“This is bigger than my problem,” he said quietly.

The silence stretched again, heavier now, layered with everything they had just uncovered.

And then, unexpectedly, Ankit laughed—softly, almost under his breath. Not freely, not without weight, but just enough to fracture the tension hanging in the air.

“What the hell is happening to us?” he said, shaking his head. “Goa gave us chaos. Bangkok is giving us identity crises.”

Sandeep let out a weak laugh. “And liver damage.”

Rajesh added dryly, “And possibly lifelong consequences.”

The laughter that followed was softer, edged with something darker.

It didn’t erase anything but it made it bearable.

Amit looked at them, his voice quieter now, almost thoughtful. “Maybe these trips... they’re not escapes.”

Ankit met his gaze, understanding settling in slowly.

“Maybe they’re just showing us things we were already avoiding,” he said.

No one argued. Because somewhere, deep down, they all knew it was true.

Ananya's Echo

The mornings in Bangkok were quite noisy with the incessant honking of tuk-tuks, vendors shouting at the top of their voices, and tourists preparing themselves to explore. However, in room 1107, there was utter silence. It was clear that there was a vast contrast in moods.

There sat Amit alone on the balcony watching the city, with his arms resting on his thighs and his hands clutching his cell phone. It felt like the cell phone was too heavy for him to lift. There was nothing that mattered at the time as he aimlessly flicked through his cell phone, his gaze fixed on one specific contact.

Ananya.

He didn't mean to open the chat but his mind seemed to tell a different story.

Her profile picture was still the same when they last talked. When everything fell apart in Amit's life like a house of cards. Amit liked that picture of her a lot. He wondered if he ever told her how the flower printed shirt makes her look so delicate. How he still longed to see the twinkle in her eyes that he remembered from the very first time he met her. It seemed so odd that such a tiny detail could encapsulate all the things that he had already lost.

He hesitated for just a second as if contemplating something before scrolling up to read their previous messages. Maybe he was a masochist but those conversations were his only respite when life and responsibilities overwhelmed him.

Reading those bits and pieces of conversations put a ghost of a smile on his face he didn't even realise. He remembered the jokes they shared that made him laugh in the wrong place, confessions that were too sincere for anyone else he could think of speaking to. Little things that meant more to him than it should have.

And then he reached the last text. Her last words to him, sent a month ago.

"I miss talking to you. But maybe this isn't right anymore."

The uncomfortable feeling never seemed to go away no matter how many times he has read the message. He had not replied. It was not because he did not want to, it's just that he did not know what he could say that would make the conversation hurt less.

Maybe if he had still been in Goa, it wouldn't have been this complicated. Because Goa brought out the version of him that he had buried deep beneath layers of responsibilities and roles he had assumed for himself. And meeting Ananya there had been a breath of fresh air, an escape.

There he was just Amit. The carefree and unapologetic version he used to be. But Bangkok had a way of stripping

you of your illusions and slapping you with reality. Here, the fine thread joining fantasy and consequence was dangerously thin. One wrong move and it could snap. What they had once viewed as simple indulgence was laden with the kind of seriousness now that had them questioning their moves twice.

Amit was now burdened with the consequence of their time spent in Goa, with the responsibility of having to face himself. Ananya, with her beautiful smile and twinkling eyes, had moved from being mere memories to decisions he had to make. And thus, became a danger to him.

He threw his phone aside and sighed, *what the hell am I doing?*

As the morning blended into afternoon, everyone left to their own explorations. Rajesh and Sandeep went to a Muay Thai match while Ankit decided he needed some alone time. Amit left alone, wandered into the inner part of the city that was off bit and away from the chaotic mess that was the city. His feet took him to a temple courtyard near Wat Saket-the Golden Mount.

The monks around the area did not speak English. But Amit wasn't there to hold conversations with them. He was searching for some peace that he found beneath a Bodhi tree, near the stall where people put incense sticks. The air around him floated with the scent of sandalwood and jasmine.

An elderly Thai woman who looked like a temple caretaker, saw him staring mindlessly at the sky. When she came near,

Amit still hadn't noticed her. So, she decided to ask in broken English, "You look...heavy,".

Amit upon noticing her, smiled politely and said, "too many thoughts."

Hearing his answer, the woman placed a small lotus flower in his hand. Amit looked at her curiously.

"Leave some. Inside the temple. With Buddha. If heavy, don't carry all."

She did not elaborate. She did not need to. Her simple words carried a depth so profound and unexpected that Amit didn't question anything.

He got up and went inside the temple. As he knelt in front of the large, golden Buddha, his problems seemed utterly small. Remembering the woman's words, he placed the lotus down and closed his eyes, letting the calmness soak in.

He whispered the words he would not dare utter loudly otherwise, "I miss her. I miss who I was with her but in missing her, I broke my home. And I don't know if I regret the moments I spent with her or everything else that did not involve her."

A moment passed. Then two but he didn't get any answer but the weight he was carrying seemed a little lighter.

As the sun began to set, the night life in Bangkok started gearing up. The four of them came together at the rooftop bar of their hotel after spending the day away from each other. The view was absolutely splendid. From the rooftop,

the city looked like stars shining in a galaxy of temptations. But the mood around their table was anything but happy. That night there were no jokes, no flimsy plans.

Everyone was silently drinking, each lost in their thoughts. Tension so thick it can be cut with a knife. Not being able to bear the silence anymore, Amit decided to break it.

“I think...I never stopped chasing something I didn’t understand,” he let out a shaky breath before continuing, “Ananya made me feel young again. I felt seen and alive when I was with her.”

“But what if all this is a ruse and by running after this momentary feeling, we are losing what’s real,” Rajesh nodded.

“All of us are chasing the versions of us that no longer exist,” Sandeep added thoughtfully. “And by chasing that version, we might be killing who we’re supposed to become.”

The silence was deafening after that. Then Ankit dropped the bomb that shattered the silence.

“I slept with Namwan again.”

His confession was like a whiplash and the way everyone turned their heads in his direction, Ankit was afraid they might have snapped their necks.

Seeing that he had everyone’s attention, he continued, “We cuddled after. She told me about her life, her struggles, how her family disowned her. Being with her made me feel safe

and understood," he paused,"I don't know what that makes me but I am not ashamed of it. Just a little scared."

After Ankit finished speaking, Amit raised his glass to toast,"To confusion."

Rajesh raised his,"To honesty."

Followed by Sandeep,"To not judging."

And finally Ankit lifted his glass,"To not being broken. Just cracked open."

At that moment, they were not rebels or adrenaline junkies, rather they were just humans. And humans are imperfect.

And then as if to diffuse the tension, Rajesh leaned back in his seat, swirled the drink in his hand and grinned,"okay guys, that was intense. However, on the bright side, we checked almost all of the classic Bangkok shenanigans boxes. Like we partied, we passed out after drinking to our heart's content, we wept, we doubted our sexuality. I mean what else is left."

Everyone chuckled and the tension that was surrounding their table lifted a little.

Rajesh's grin widened and he got that specific look on his face that screamed trouble.

"How about we stop questioning everything till we are here and start enjoying like it's our last day on earth? What do you all think about hitting the casino tonight? We can go to the walking street tomorrow and this time find some *real* Thai girls for our friend Ankit?"

Yeah, that plan is the synonym of trouble.

Ankit rolled his eyes so hard, they were afraid it would get stuck on the back of his head.

“Very funny, dude,” Ankit remarked.

Sandeep jumped in, raising his empty glass to toast, “To sins that don’t need therapy after!”

Amit, who was still pondering about his failed marriage and his moments with Ananya, managed a small smile. Rajesh, ever the charmer, leaned forward, his eyes sparkling.

“So, last wild ride before we head back home. This time no regrets and definitely no problems tagging along us home. Anyone up for it?”

Silence followed but then all of them nodded. The atmosphere slowly shifted like a tiger stirring from its slumber. Tomorrow, they will be walking right into hungry mouths of the neon-lit dark side of Bangkok and hope they don’t get eaten up.

The Deal Gone Wrong

The next evening rolled around like some sort of reset button they had unknowingly pushed.

Everything they had confessed to each other last night, the things they had said, everything that was left unsaid, the honesty that had momentarily made them feel exposed and vulnerable and vulnerable had been neatly tucked away somewhere. None of it was forgotten but rather set aside in favor of what the night demanded.

And tonight demanded something entirely different.

The air itself had a different quality about it. It was thicker, more charged, somehow, like something you couldn't quite shake, like anticipation stuck to your skin and seeping into your blood. Bangkok under neon light offered no chance for contemplation; only capitulation.

Ankit lingered in front of his mirror, fidgeting nervously with his shirt collar for what seemed like the third time that night. He'd slicked his hair back precisely, and he was suffocating in the potent aroma of his cologne. There was a certain sense of purpose in his preparations, a method to the madness, as though preparation itself could act as an armor against the changes that were beginning to take place within him.

On the contrary, Rajesh didn't have any self-control. He had a certain sparkle in his eyes once again – one that seemed restless, eager, even hungry. He was sitting on the side of the bed, browsing through his mobile phone, rapidly tapping away at the screen while texting someone whose name was clearly a pretense for a different reason – “Thai Fun”. From time to time, a smirk would flicker across his lips.

Sandeep put on his aviator sunglasses in front of the mirror despite the sun being long gone. “I’ve officially entered Hangover mode, guys,” he said, smiling at his own reflection, embracing the madness of it with utter devotion. He felt comfortable in this—acting out the role, making sure everything remained amusing enough to avoid anything beneath from being scrutinized.

But then there was Amit—

Amit shocked everyone. He appeared serene.

His silence wasn't carefree. It was simply...quiet. The storm brewing within him seemed to quieten, not gone but less ferocious – something he could bear without the tempest threatening to spill out. Perhaps it was acceptance. Perhaps it was exhaustion. Or perhaps it was just the third shot of whiskey he drank.

Whatever it was, he didn't dwell on it. Tonight, he wouldn't.

You see, Pattaya's walking streets do not welcome you with garlands and coconut water. It slams into you so hard, you wouldn't know what hit you.

Everywhere you look, there's a cacophony of various sounds, colours and motion that even a seasoned party-goer would find too much. Neon lights blazed from all sides, neon signboards piling up one another, as if begging for your attention. The music came pouring out from all the bars around the area, mixing together into an amalgamation you couldn't concentrate on.

Women in bikinis leaned out of doorways, giggling and extending their hands toward those who passed, grabbing onto arms. The names of the clubs were in bold display – Fahrenheit, Baccara, Airport A-Go-Go – each one more outrageous than the last.

Anywhere you look, you will find temptation on the streets, open and unapologetic.

Rajesh, true to his nature, was the first to give in to the temptations. He stopped at a roadside bar, asking for flaming drinks, and downed them like water. The drinks worked as liquid courage for whatever the night may bring.

Meanwhile, Sandeep was lost in his tunes, dancing with a Dj he didn't even realize was trans, his laughter echoed through air.

Ankit lingered near a street performer, pretending to flirt, exaggerating his expressions just enough to turn it into a

joke, capturing the moment in a selfie that he would probably never show anyone back home.

For a while, it worked. All the noise, the movement, the distraction just disappeared. But it wasn't long before they came to haunt them.

Suddenly, a man came up to them. He seemed almost too polished, as if he had been studying them for a while and knew precisely when to intervene. He was tall, dressed impeccably in an ivory suit that made him stand out amid the pandemonium surrounding him. He wore a sharp smile, one that conveyed both promise and danger in equal measure.

"You gentlemen from India?" he asked in an easygoing manner, even though there was nothing easygoing about his eyes.

"Yes," Rajesh replied straightaway.

"Then I have the perfect night for you," the man replied, his voice dropping an octave. "It's a VIP party, with casino girls and international guests. Something you won't find on TripAdvisor."

Ankit cocked his head to one side, intrigued. Amit said nothing but continued to watch him.

"Experience all in one," the man added as he handed Rajesh a shiny black card. "Limited offer."

As he leaned in, it was clear that what followed would be kept between them.

“Sharp at midnight. And ask for Mr.Pong.”

And just like that, he vanished. They stared at each other for a second, the card exchanged between them, its simple nature almost ridiculous compared to its implications. It seemed like a cliché. Like the start of something that always had an unfortunate ending.

However, standing there, right at the center of all that Bangkok was offering them, it did not come off as a warning. It came off as an invitation. And none of them were ready to reject it.

It wasn't long before they were standing in front of the place the man mentioned. The door was devoid of the neon signs that marked other places. If you didn't know better, you would never guess there's a whole world of temptations and bad decisions behind that door.

It was immense, much bigger than they had anticipated, concealed under the facade of an apparently deserted industrial shed. The change was unbelievable. Red lights softened the atmosphere of the room, creating an illusion of something straight out of a dream, while gold-framed chandeliers dangled from the ceiling, swaying softly in sync with the base thumps of jazz music emanating from the speakers.

The smell followed next. It was a mixture of an expensive perfume, cigar smoke, and some heavier scent that hinted at luxury.

One game in particular stood out among the rest. There was a roulette wheel turning in a steady, almost hypnotic pace. Another gambling table caught their eye—the table where people played blackjack and the sharp-suited men were gathered around.

On the other side, there were dancers moving slowly beneath the pink lighting; their bodies glowing with the light in an almost surreal way.

It was clear that the bar had been designed to showcase itself. Rows upon rows of liquor bottles they have never heard the name of, getting stronger with each successive drink. Behind the bar stood a female bartender covered with dragon tattoos who seemed to know exactly what she was doing.

Ankit picked one for himself. It left a burning sensation both sharp and sweet, a warmth spreading instantly.

Rajesh made up his mind immediately.

“I’m going to play,” he declared, heading straight for the blackjack table.

The others followed, uncertain but curious.

When Rajesh staked his chips, the chips he had won in exchange for the ten thousand dollars he had sent before, Sandeep moved closer to Ankit and whispered,

“Has he lost his mind?”

“Or it could be he knows something that we do not,” retorted Amit, not very convinced of his own words.

It looked like luck at first. But soon, it started to look like something else altogether.

Hand after hand, Rajesh won. The dealer flashed a grin. Chips piled up.

“21.”

“Black 17.”

“Another blackjack.”

It all fell into place, one triumph building upon another, until doubt became exhilaration.

Sandeep hollered and raised his drink. “We’ve got ourselves a free holiday, boys!”

Ankit patted Rajesh on his back, chuckling. Even Amit cracked a smile, the atmosphere becoming slightly less tense. “Golden touch,” he muttered.

It was almost unbelievable for some time. As though they were living in an alternate reality, everything was in their favor.

There were girls, Ploy and Mint, who seamlessly merged into the scene, giggling softly, enhancing the illusion.

They felt invincible. That is precisely what made the whole thing wrong. Everything happened without any notice. The music ceased suddenly, leaving behind awkward silences, the red light switched to a harsh, glaring white light, tearing away the illusion immediately. There were voices yelling loudly, in rapid Thai.

But then suddenly the door flew open. In poured the police, their arrival sudden and intense. Shouting orders, moving swiftly and with purpose, chaos erupted all around.

Everything came crashing down instantly.

"Move!" Amit screamed out over the noise. Everyone scattered.

The first instinctive response for Rajesh was to topple the pieces onto the table, but Sandeep pulled him away by grabbing his arm.

A security guard grabbed another man from close by and threw him down to the floor. The other tried to resist but then lost the fight.

For a brief second, Ankit made eye contact with an officer. It was something about the situation, something instinctive, that made them act.

"RUN!" screamed Sandeep.

And they did.

Down a corridor, turning a corner, down a cramped hallway, almost feeling as if the walls were narrowing with each step. The back door came into view suddenly, partially concealed by heavy drapes, and they burst out into the open air.

The alley was narrow, dark, and oppressive in its own right. Their breathing became erratic and rapid, their hearts beating too loud to ignore.

"Rajesh, what the hell was that?" Amit asked, but his voice sounded uncertain and nervous.

"I don't know!" Rajesh answered.

Sirens were screaming behind them. Voices were ringing but they did not stop running.

The street was a whole other world. It looked nothing like the chaotic mess the club was. Everything was shiny, clear, almost regular.

Then they heard the sound of a horn. It was abrupt but recognizable.

A yellow-green cab stopped abruptly right by their side; the door opened before they had time to blink.

"Hurry! Get in!", the driver yelled.

Toom.

Relief washed over them in one sweeping wave, laced with disbelief. They poured in without a moment's pause, with words tripping over themselves, with breathing still ragged.

"Just drive! Don't stop!"

Toom needed no explanations. There was no time for that. The car leaped out into traffic like it had been trained to do so.

He did not say anything until they were far enough away from the scene.

"You make mistake about where you going," he stated, his voice quiet yet commanding. "Very dangerous people."

An uncomfortable silence filled the vehicle.

"You very lucky," he continued, casting a quick glance their way through the rearview mirror. "Not in jail... or worse."

Rajesh stared straight ahead, no longer full of confidence as he had been before.

"I just assumed it was gambling," he said.

Toom sighed knowingly.

"That's not gambling," he said. "That's the mafia."

Outside, the city lights rushed past, their bright neon light now menacing rather than welcoming.

As they approached their hotel, Toom shook his head a little bit, with a small smirk playing on his lips.

"Boys, do you think that Bangkok is Goa?" he asked.

Without waiting for a response, he added, "No, Bangkok is not Goa, man!"

The vehicle came to a halt. And for the first time since they got there, the reality hit home.

Bangkok did not cooperate and it was definitely not playing around.

The Girl Named Lila

When they finally returned to the hotel, it was unnaturally silent. A silence so thick you could cut it with a knife. It was the kind of silence that comes after an adrenaline rush. Outside their window, the skyline was twinkling with thousands of lights, the city awake with movements and colour. But inside the hotel room, the mood was dull and exhausted. The AC hummed softly above them, the only sound heard in the otherwise silent room.

Ankit lay flat on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Rajesh paced back and forth near the minibar, his jaw tight and hands shaking. Amit sat on the couch, rubbing his temple. Sandeep opened a beer can with more force than was necessary, only for foam to explode over his hand and onto the carpet.

“Fuck,” he muttered frustrated, throwing the can halfway across the room before dropping heavily onto the couch.

The raid had shaken them more than any of them wanted to admit. Bangkok no longer felt thrilling as it did when they first arrived. It was starting to feel dangerous.

Rajesh finally stopped pacing and dragged a hand down his face and exhaled sharply before speaking.

“Alright,” he said, his voice lower than it usually is, stripped of its normal swagger. “I messed up.”

No one interrupted him.

“I thought we were just playing cards,” he continued. “I didn’t think we were walking into a fucking war zone.”

The sincerity in his voice caught them off guard.

Rajesh was normally the first to use humor to ease out of awkward situations, the first to make light of tensions before they could escalate. However, he seemed truly shaken up right now, and for some reason, that made things even more intense.

Sandeep instantly straightened up, his frustration bubbling out before he could hold it back.

“You nearly had us jailed, dude!” he shouted. “Without Aran around, I reckon we’d most likely have found ourselves sitting in a Bangkok prison cell, along with a prisoner called Big Somchai!”

It was such a ludicrous thought that even Ankit couldn’t help but snicker quietly, letting the stress out through laughter since they didn’t know any other way to vent their emotions.

“Thankfully, Somchai won’t poke me beneath the covers like Namwan did,” he grumbled.

Rajesh looked at him in disbelief. “Bro,” he shook his head, “not the time.”

Nevertheless, Sandeep couldn't help but laugh. Even Amit's lips curled a little. For just that instant, the darkness disappeared. Until it returned not long after.

Amit slowly leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. Finally, when he spoke, his voice was tinged with an edginess that they had never heard before.

"This trip..." he said softly, "it's not what I need."

Everyone went quiet for a moment. No more jokes because everyone knew what Amit was referring to. This wasn't Goa anymore.

It felt as if Goa had been a carefree escape into a world without any worries. They had come back from there laughing and with tales that they would recount years later while exaggerating their experiences.

Bangkok was different. Bangkok dug into you and brought out secrets. Secrets that had been kept from view for years now.

The suite remained quiet with the darkness settling in.

Amit was flipping through some old photos of his daughter when suddenly memories hit him out of the blue. Ankit was standing close to the window, gazing at the cityscape in a trance-like state, as if he were trying to figure out some part of himself that did not seem to belong in the world he had created for himself. Rajesh was constantly checking his phone while contemplating whether or not to contact the fixer regarding the money he had lost, torn between his pride and panic. Sandeep stepped onto the balcony with a

cigarette, lighting it carefully before crushing it halfway through, unable to finish even that.

The four of them believed that their friendship was unbreakable. This holiday, however, was breaking them apart piece by piece.

It was showing them who they really were underneath the façade of their perfectly acted out roles. And none of them knew what would remain once the peeling stopped.

Morning came slowly.

Light filtered through the Bangkok skyline, casting golden hues on the glass towers as life below continued ceaselessly. Within the hotel room, the boys roused one by one from their slumber—tired, thirsty, and emotionally drained.

However, something within Amit had changed.

The urge to indulge in distractions was not as overwhelming as it used to be. Parties, alcohol, and the never-ending quest for excitement seemed incredibly tiring now, rather than thrilling.

He slipped on a fresh T-shirt, threw a small bag over his shoulder, and walked towards the door.

“Going for a walk,” he murmured.”

“Alone?”

Rajesh looked up from his phone, surprised.

Amit nodded.

Rajesh smirked weakly. “Don’t get kidnapped by monks.”

But the joke only got a few tired laughs. Meanwhile, Amit just smiled weakly before stepping outside.

The city outside was more gentle in the morning hours.

Amit started walking around Sukhumvit at random, gradually getting farther away from the noise of the city and its streets filled with bars and the promise of endless fun. With each step, Bangkok became quieter, and he found himself in tiny alleyways that smelled of fragrant flowers and grilled meats instead.

He did not know what he was searching for. Perhaps peace, or perhaps it was perspective. That there was something within him that could be saved.

That was when he saw her. She was seated cross-legged before a little flower shop sandwiched between two narrow buildings. White lotuses were laid out on the table in neat piles, their sweet fragrance hovering in the thick air.

He looked at her when he felt her looking back at him.

“You seem lost,” she whispered to him, and a smile crept across her lips.

Amit chuckled softly, feeling rather surprised at how much it hit home.

“You think I’m that easy to figure out?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Your mind is probably louder than the cars on the road right now.”

There was no flirtation in her voice. Just plain observation. So, Amit found himself sitting on a bench not far away

almost on autopilot. Her name, she said, was Lila. She was half-Thai and half-Indian.

Her father had left when she was young, and now she helped her mother at the flower stall whenever she could. She spoke calmly, without rushing, without trying to impress him. There was something grounding about her presence, something steady.

Lila was not like Ananya.

Ananya came into his life like temptation – dazzling, alluring, hard to resist. It was not the same with Lila. She was more subdued and safe.

She did not use flirtatious eye contact or well-thought-out words to win him over. She just listened. Really listened. And he realized how long it had been since anyone had listened to him.

They spoke for over an hour. They talked about their childhood, about how lonely life gets sometimes, how even in large cities, it's easy to become invisible even with millions surrounding you.

They would laugh. They would pause silently for a moment or two before picking up from where they left off. There was no strain in the exchange. No acting involved.

“You don’t seem like a man who came to Bangkok for flowers,” she teased eventually.

For the first time since that morning, Amit managed to smile without trying.

“No, I haven’t,” he confessed. “But I do believe I’ve discovered something else.”

They saw each other again the following day. And the day after that.

Gradually, unwittingly, Amit was beginning to distance himself from the madness of the holiday weekend.

Whereas the rest were busy indulging themselves in bars, casinos, and the nightlife that is drenched in neon, he found himself lingering near temples, sipping coffee with Lila at quaint cafes situated beside the Chao Phraya River, strolling down candlelit streets, talking.

There were no seductions here. Neither were any games played. There were no desperate efforts to outdo one another. It was pure connection like finding a best friend.

Yet this intimacy was more profound than anything physical.

One night, while they were seated by the riverside as ferries glided through the silent waters, Amit told her everything. About Goa, Ananya, the texts, his wife departing. And the agonizing silence of his apartment afterward.

He anticipated criticism. Or maybe sympathy. Yet she just listened.

After he was done talking, she looked at him briefly before saying, “Love doesn’t always come in the package we expect.”

Amit stared at her.

“Sometimes,” she said quietly, “it comes as an accident. Sometimes as a lesson. And sometimes it comes as a mirror.”

Her words found their way into the depths of his being.

“But at least it always teaches you,” she concluded.

Amit understood at that moment that he had not fallen in love with Lila. Perhaps that was what enabled her to heal him, since for the first time in months he wasn’t following his fantasies.

He was just breathing again.

One day, Lila brought him to Wat Arun.

The Temple of Dawn towered against the evening sky as if it were sculpted out of light, the setting sun shimmering off its complex design to make it glow golden against the river.

They were silent as they sat at the foot of the stairs, watching people walk past them in the distance.

Lila held a lotus blossom delicately in her hands, folding its petals inward with careful precision.

“It’s a custom in Thailand,” Lila said softly, “to fold the petals inward, as a sign of reverence. It’s to indicate that beauty can be found within silence.”

She gave him the blossom. Amit gazed silently at the blossom for a long time before speaking.

"I came here thinking I needed to lose control," he admitted quietly. "Maybe I just needed to stop running long enough to hear myself think."

"Maybe," she replied, "all you needed was to meet yourself."

Their hands touched as he accepted the lotus from her but neither of them made any move to break away. There was no rush about it.

Just silence. And somehow, the silence seemed to be divine.

That night, while seated by the river, watching the twinkling city lights on the waters, Amit had an epiphany that shocked him.

For the first time since Goa, he did not feel like pieces of himself were breaking off.

The emptiness in his heart had not gone away. But he did not feel like it would never end anymore.

As soon as Amit came back to the hotel that night, everybody could tell the difference.

It wasn't dramatic nor was it obvious. But it was there. Something about him had changed. He seemed... lighter, somehow.

Rajesh picked up on it first. "What's going on?" he said suspiciously. "Did you find God or something?"

Amit grinned as he plopped down on the couch.

"Pretty close," Amit said softly. "I've found my peace."

They exchanged amused glances.

“And her name is Lila.”

This perked up their interest.

Sandeep lifted an eyebrow. “Bangkok romance number two?”

But Amit only shook his head slowly.

“Not like that,” he said.

His voice made sure that they understood him.

There was silence once again, although this time it was a different kind of silence. It was softer and thoughtful.

Perhaps this adventure was not just an adventure after all.

Perhaps through all the alcohol and the lying and the excitement, it was driving them towards what they had been trying to avoid all along.

The truth about themselves.

Ankit was still carrying uncertainty that he couldn't articulate. Panic was concealed under Rajesh's charm and arrogance. Sandeep concealed all his true emotions through humour.

But Amit?

Amit, at last, was done hiding and ready to climb up from the rubble.

Redemption Or Relapse?

The poster showed up sometime around the early hours of the morning.

Nobody heard knocking at the door. Neither did anyone see when it slipped under their door in the hotel. The next morning it just lay there on the floor, waiting for someone to accept it.

Gold leaf, black print on velvety material and right in the middle, the shape of a nearly nude woman curved underneath soft red light.

THE LOTUS DEN – One Night. No Rules. VIP Access for the Wild Few.

Rajesh found it first.

“Well,” said Rajesh, whistling under his breath as he looked at it, “this is how you end your holiday.”

Half-asleep, Sandeep shuffled into the kitchen from the bedroom and looked at the poster with a smile. “More like a cult than a party,” he said.

“We have done emotional healing,” snapped Rajesh back. “We have gone through identity crises; we have almost been killed by Thai mobsters. Don’t you think we deserve a nice ending?”

Ankit was standing by the window, taking slow sips out of his bottle of water. He did not react for a minute. His mind was somewhere else, lost in thoughts that he could not free himself of despite all his efforts.

Namwan's laugh. Her warm body by his side and the sense of safety he had felt when being with her, something that terrified him because he felt safe. What scared him was not the desire anymore. It was the longing he felt for her.

"It's just one night," said Rajesh theatrically as he threw the flier on the table. "Nothing to feel guilty about. Nothing to think about. No regrets. Just stories that we will bury so deep that even our grandkids won't be able to find them."

Everyone laughed except for Sandeep who smiled weakly.

Then all eyes turned towards Amit. Everyone was shocked when Amit was the first one to agree.

"Well, screw it," he whispered, leaning back into the sofa. "If this is going to be our last night, we may as well let it burn."

There was something about how he had said it that convinced everyone else. There were no arguments or delays. This night was set.

The Lotus Den was not present anywhere on the Internet.

No website. No online ratings or reviews. No geotag on any social networking website.

Just an address communicated via a private message two hours before midnight.

The black van appeared right on time at the hotel entrance. The tint on its windows was so dark that everything outside became just a blur of neon lights. Inside, the smell of expensive cologne and perfume was all around them.

They hardly said anything on the way.

Bangkok blurred before their eyes in streaks of color and darkness until at last the car stopped at an upscale neighborhood dotted with art galleries and exclusive boutique stores.

The place didn't seem that unusual. It was an art gallery. Simple-looking and covered with glass walls; no indication whatsoever that it was anything else.

Underneath that, however, lay another world hidden behind a black matte door that bore nothing but a small red dragon symbol.

Once they crossed its threshold, it took them in completely.

Lavishness seemed to seep out of all the nooks and crannies in the place. Thick velvet draperies hung down from the vaulted ceiling, floor mirrors reflected flickering red lights so that soon it was hard to distinguish between reality and imagination. Above them, golden cages were hanging from the ceiling, occupied by graceful acrobats dancing midair to soft electronic beats emanating from nowhere in particular.

The crowd walked about the room donning masks made of porcelain—white, faceless, beautiful. Men, women, some whose gender could not be determined, floated gracefully

past with trays of champagne, sushi, and silver platters of items too forbidden to name aloud.

It was an unreal place.

As if entering into a dream created by those who had long ago stopped distinguishing pleasure from danger.

Sandeep gazed all around him with eyes as wide as saucers. "What in God's name are we supposed to be doing here?"

Rajesh couldn't help but grin at once, finding himself at ease among the chaos. "This," he said gleefully, "is precisely why people created money."

In no time at all, each person took to their own corner of temptation.

Rajesh made himself disappear at a table of poker playing with a Korean heiress and a Spanish model, feeling that old competitive instinct kick in the moment chips were stacked between them. He laughed louder with every drink, slipping effortlessly back into the version of himself that believed charm alone could outrun consequences.

Sandeep found himself drawn into the group of Russians who were conducting their so-called "body-shot championship." He resisted for only about five seconds before joining in, having already had sufficient alcohol that he could forget his earlier outpourings.

Yet another surprise came from Amit, who did not drink at all.

He wandered around the place slowly, glass in his hand, observing more than engaging. The chaotic behavior that surrounded him did not have the same hypnotic effect on him that it once had. The sounds seemed far away, as if he were emotionally detaching from them.

Something about Lila had altered something inside him. Not dramatically but enough, nonetheless.

Enough for him to notice the extent to which everyone seemed to be grasping at distraction around him.

Enough for him to realize that he too had been doing exactly the same thing for several years.

Ankit walked amidst the throng, much less comfortably than the rest.

He couldn't help but search out faces as if expecting and dreading the presence of someone.

At one moment, he spotted a red-latex-clad figure ducking behind a curtain, and the palpitations in his heart were so strong it felt like an embarrassment.

For an irrational moment, he thought it was Namwan.

But he was mistaken. What worried him was the disappointment he felt upon realizing that fact.

"You alright?" Sandeep finally asked, coming up next to him with smudged lipstick on his cheek and the look of a man whose veins were full of vodka by then.

Ankit nodded absentmindedly. "Yeah. Just enjoying it."

“Make someone else enjoy it too before nightfall!” Rajesh yelled from the other side of the room, brandishing his drink theatrically while somebody clapped next to him.

Ankit chuckled faintly, but his chest felt oddly empty.

All around him, others abandoned themselves to the night.

To dreams. To indulgence. To the tantalizing prospect that they had an eternity to face the repercussions of their actions.

For a time, he wanted to believe it too.

Ankit stood there much later on a private balcony, surveying Bangkok alone.

The whole city seemed to stretch out beneath him, bustling with life even now. Lights blinked into visibility through the dark skies as vehicles continued their incessant hum.

Behind him, the Lotus Den was abuzz with chaos. Flesh entangled under the glow of the red lights.

Noise that is so loud it drowns all thinking.

But here, separated by nothing but glass, everything seemed so much quieter than ever before.

Amit moved to stand beside him without making a sound, glass in hand half-filled.

They did not say anything to each other for a while.

Finally, Amit sighed. "This would have knocked my socks off three days ago."

Ankit threw a side-glance at him. "So, what now?"

Amit shook his shoulders slightly. "It's all just sad."

This really took him aback.

Inside, someone was screaming in drunken joy with the blaring of music.

Ankit leant against the railings. "I don't know what is happening to me anymore," he said finally.

There was no interruption from Amit.

"I had been spending my entire life thinking that attraction should make sense," Ankit went on speaking softly. "But then all of a sudden, things change."

His laughter was bitter.

"She seemed so real to me, Amit. And that is the worst part."

Amit looked towards the skyline.

"Maybe whatever is not right might not necessarily be wrong," he said slowly. "Maybe what feels right doesn't have to be the truth."

Ankit looked at him for a moment and then shook his head in amusement.

"That was very profound of you."

"I had an excellent teacher," Amit said, remembering Lila.

Both looked back into the room.

Rajesh had managed to climb up onto the DJ's stage without his shirt, yelling something that could not be understood by everyone cheering for him.

Sandeep was lying halfway unconscious on a velvet couch, muttering, "My tongue doesn't feel like anything, but emotionally speaking, I'm flourishing."

Ankit finally laughed for the first time during the entire night, and this time it was genuine.

And somewhere inside that laughter, something loosened. Maybe he didn't need all the answers tonight.

Maybe nobody did.

Dawn was only just beginning to break as the Lotus Den slowly emptied out.

The lights had become softer, fatigue taking over from adrenaline.

The four of them met up at the door, looking every bit the part of what they had turned into during their journey here.

Rajesh lifted the last glass theatrically. "To Bangkok," he said.

"To whatever psychological scarring this caused," mumbled Sandeep hoarsely.

Amit smiled slightly. "To discovering yourself."

Ankit looked into his glass for a moment before whispering back, "Or perhaps even losing a part of yourself on the way."

The glasses touched softly.

None of them moved for a few seconds.

But, predictably enough, Rajesh was the one who spoiled the mood first.

"All right," he declared with a wicked smile coming back on his face, "no more psychotherapy sessions. Let's go to Walking Street one last time. Perhaps a legal gambling place this time."

He gestured towards Ankit.

"And for the sake of God, from now on, we check everyone."

Sandeep burst out laughing immediately.

Even Amit started choking on his drink.

Ankit shook his head, rolling his eyes while chuckling.

"You'll never stop doing this, will you?"

"No way," said Rajesh.

Sandeep put an arm around them both. "Come on," he giggled, "let's go have some fun!"

Ankit drained the last of his drink, savoring the taste before letting it fall.

"Yeah," he whispered, his mouth curling up in a peculiar grin. "Let's make tonight one we'll forget."

And with a laugh, with broken souls they were not quite sure of yet, they went off again into the neon pulse of Bangkok.

Homebound and Humbled

The departure lounge at Suvarnabhumi Airport carried a kind of stillness that felt almost unnatural after everything that had unfolded in the days before. It was quiet in the way expensive spaces often are—polished floors reflecting white overhead lights, announcements floating softly through hidden speakers, people moving with measured patience as if even their urgency had been diluted by the design of the place.

For the four men, that calm didn't feel comforting. It felt like a sudden drop in temperature after standing too long in fire.

Somehow Rajesh had managed to make himself spread out over three chairs at the airport in such a position as though he was lying and sitting at the same time. It must have been an awkward-looking position, but it felt totally natural to him. His lips were slightly parted and breathing slow, suggesting that finally his body had yielded to his refusal to sleep over days. Sandeep was seated straight up next to him, looking through the pictures on his phone, smiling as if remembering the chaos they survived. Sometimes, his finger would pause, and one picture would be wiped off as if removing evidence.

Amit stayed closest to the window. Outside, planes moved with mechanical grace, indifferent to the emotional

wreckage of the people inside. He held a paper cup of black coffee that had long gone cold, though he kept sipping it anyway, as if the bitterness anchored him to something familiar. There was a heaviness in his stillness, a quietness that wasn't peace but exhaustion that had learned how to sit upright.

Unlike everyone else, Ankit seemed like he wasn't even there. He sat motionless, looking at the display board while wearing headphones that produced no sound. Flight numbers and gates changed on the board, but not his gaze; it remained unmoving as if focusing through the board instead of on it. His hands were relaxed in his lap, still and immobile, it's like his body had forgotten what to do without anything to fix.

No one spoke for a while. Not because there was nothing to say, but because everything already felt said in ways that were too large to repeat casually in an airport lounge.

Finally, Sandeep spoke, his tone low and hesitant, like testing if words had a right to be used by him anymore.

"I think I need a detox," he said, exhaling slowly. "From everything."

Rajesh didn't even open his eyes. His response came out dry, automatic, shaped by familiarity rather than interest.

"You say that after every trip."

"This time I mean it," Sandeep replied, softer now, the smirk fading from his face.

Ankit let out a small laugh, but it didn't carry any warmth. It sounded like a reflex rather than emotion, something his body produced because silence had become too heavy to hold.

They had all packed their bags in the morning, but none of them felt like they were carrying only clothes or souvenirs. Each of them carried something less visible and far more difficult to fold away—guilt that didn't know where to settle, questions that didn't have language yet, memories that kept replaying themselves without permission.

Rajesh finally sat up, rubbing his face slowly like he was trying to wake himself from something deeper than sleep.

"We all got our share of truth bombs," he said, voice rough with fatigue. Then his gaze landed on Amit, then Ankit, as though assigning weight to each of them in his mind. "Amit's broken marriage. Ankit's..."

He stopped mid-sentence, searching for a word that wouldn't feel like it cut too sharply.

"...awakening," he finished quietly.

"Say it," Ankit snapped almost immediately, sharper than he intended. The sudden edge in his voice startled even him. "I slept with a ladyboy. It happened and I liked it. I don't know what that makes me."

For a moment, the air seemed to tighten around them. Even the hum of the airport felt distant, like it had politely stepped away to give them space.

Amit looked at him then, properly, for the first time in what felt like hours.

“It makes you human,” he said gently. There was no judgment in his tone, only a kind of tired understanding. “Confused. Brave, even.”

Rajesh let out a low whistle, leaning back slightly as if to create distance from the intensity of the moment.

“Look at us,” he muttered. “Mid-life heroes. Or victims you can say.”

No one laughed at that, but something in it softened the tension. Not enough to fix anything, but enough to make it bearable.

The flight that followed didn’t feel like travel. It felt like suspension. A long, sealed stretch of time where the world outside was unreachable and the world inside had nowhere to escape.

This was the first journey for all of them where they did not indulge in anything – drinking or forced jokes or listening to music through headphones. Even Rajesh was not trying his hand at any jokes. And neither was Sandeep trying to ease the tension in any way. Their silences were not awkward; they were conscious, as if everyone knew that something had changed within them.

Each of them stayed trapped in their own private loops of memory.

Ankit could not get Namwan’s voice out of his head. It was not just her words that lingered in his mind but also the

ease of her speech, the lack of judgment in it that suggested that she did not feel the need to judge him for things that he did not know how to articulate. He kept thinking that, for the first time in a while, he had felt truly seen but not defined.

“I’m not ready to label myself,” he thought quietly, staring at the seat in front of him. “But I can’t pretend it didn’t mean something.”

Thoughts in Amit’s mind veered into a darker territory, heavy and disjointed. Sometime during the plane journey, Amit re-opened some old WhatsApp conversations with his wife. Conversations that were short, dry, and achinglly devoid of feeling when they should have been otherwise.

As he read, it was as though he was looking for that point when everything began to unravel as if clarity could fix it.

“We could’ve saved it if I’d been honest earlier,” he whispered under his breath, though the cabin noise swallowed most of it.

But while there was regret, there was also something else. The idea of Lila didn’t only induce guilt, but rather reminded him of what happened when he let himself be his true self—not necessarily good, not necessarily bad, but at least being honest.

Quiet and unusually reserved, Sandeep began to write in his notebook at some point during the flight. He rarely wrote down anything other than text messages or captions,

but this was different: he had started a journal on this flight.

“I think I’m done with pretending this is just fun,” he wrote. “These trips... they open doors we don’t know how to shut.”

He paused after writing that line, staring at it longer than necessary, as though trying to decide whether it was truth or exaggeration.

Rajesh, on the other hand, had left contemplation behind for something far less stable. He drew up plans for the future on a napkin—city names and itineraries, fragments of excitement attempting to put themselves back together.

“Manila, Vegas, Pattaya again,” he murmured under his breath, testing the rhythm of possibility.

But even he was not completely certain anymore. Some kind of silent fracture was beginning to emerge inside him, something that was subtle yet undeniable. The thought of the casino, the unexpected appearance of the police, and the momentary realization of the repercussions remained with him longer than any exhilaration ever would.

Returning home was now more of an impending challenge than anything else.

Customs came first. Immigration next. Baggage claim last. Slowly, bit by bit, their collective journey broke down into solitary farewells.

There were no grand departures or drawn-out handshake sessions. No candid poses taken with grins frozen into place

on their faces. There was only mutual acknowledgement, a nod, some exhausted eye contact, the realization that what transpired between them was not to leave the airport.

Sandeep's home was the first kind of silence.

His wife received him with neither surprise nor warmth. Formal, cool, distant in a manner that called for no explanation but also did not permit one. He observed how she did not utter even one query. Neither did he offer an answer.

That night, when he lay in bed pretending to sleep, she placed her hand gently on his shoulder. It was not forgiveness. Not acceptance. Something more fragile than both—an attempt.

Rajesh's home felt like an impact.

His children ran toward him before he even properly stepped inside, wrapping themselves around him with the kind of unfiltered joy that made everything else feel irrelevant for a moment. His wife handed him a list almost immediately—repairs, errands, things waiting to be fixed.

A feeling of normality came crashing down upon him as suddenly as if somebody had let gravity have its way. But somehow, for once, he did not turn away from this pressure through humor. Instead, he remained standing just a bit longer before pulling his kids into a hug.

Ankit's home was quieter than all of them.

His wife slept when he arrived. The house was dark except for the faint glow from a hallway light. He stood for a long

time watching her face—peaceful, steady, untouched by the turbulence that had followed him across borders.

“How do I even begin to tell you?” he whispered, though there was no reply waiting.

He didn’t sleep that night. Not because he couldn’t find rest, but because rest felt dishonest.

Amit’s home was emptier still.

No sound of feet, no voices, nothing recognizable that normally made silence tolerable. He dumped his luggage in the hallway and remained still, as if listening for some response to his arrival.

The absence of the sounds of his daughter’s play surprised him. It didn’t hit him like a hammer; it simply left him alone.

He entered the study quietly and then opened a drawer and took out a dusty family picture. He gently put it down on the desk. And after a few moments, he laid down another, more recent photograph—the one with Lila, smiling, but in a past that seemed both remarkable and a mistake now.

Two photographs and two different lives. Both unwilling to cancel each other out.

And in that quiet room, he finally broke down, not loudly, not theatrically, but in the kind of silence that feels heavier than sound.

The next day, the group chat remained untouched.

No messages appeared. No jokes, no updates, no attempts to reassemble what had briefly existed between them.

The silence wasn't accidental. It was recognition.

Bangkok had not simply been a trip or a sequence of stories they would later retell. It had been something sharper and more personal—a mirror held up long enough for each of them to see what they had avoided for years.

They were not the same men who had boarded that flight from India.

And somewhere beneath the quiet routines of returning home, each of them understood that truth without needing to say it aloud.

What Happens in Bangkok...

It had been exactly a month since they had returned from Bangkok.

Thirty days had passed since the airport goodbyes, the silent taxi rides home, and the awkward return to lives that suddenly felt both familiar and unfamiliar. Bangkok had receded into memory, yet none of them had managed to leave it behind completely. It lingered in unexpected places—in the middle of work meetings, during sleepless nights, while sitting in traffic, or while staring at a spouse across the dinner table. The city itself was thousands of kilometres away, but what it had unearthed in each of them remained stubbornly present.

The group chat had become quieter over the past few weeks. The silence was different this time.

The endless stream of jokes, drunken voice notes, and reckless travel plans had gradually been replaced by practical conversations. Someone would share a cricket score, someone else would forward a meme. Occasionally Rajesh would send a ridiculous reel at two in the morning. The conversations never completely stopped, but they seemed to circle around safer topics, as though all four men instinctively understood that there were certain things they weren't ready to revisit through a phone screen.

Then, on a mild Saturday afternoon, a message appeared. It came from Amit.

“Boys. Need chai. Park? 6 p.m.”

Nobody replied to it but at six o'clock, all four of them showed up.

The park is a short walk from Ankit's house. It wasn't particularly beautiful or memorable. There were no manicured gardens or jogging tracks designed for social media photographs. Just an old stone bench beneath a cluster of neem trees, patches of uneven grass, and the distant sounds of children playing cricket with a plastic bat.

It was ordinary. Perhaps that was exactly why they chose it.

The tea vendor near the gate was doing brisk business. Children raced across the open ground while their parents watched from a distance. An elderly man listened to old Kishore Kumar songs on his phone. The evening carried the familiar scent of dust, tea, and freshly cut grass.

Life had continued while they were away and it had continued after they returned.

For the first few minutes, none of them said much.

They sat with plastic cups of chai warming their hands and watched the world move around them. There was no discomfort in the silence, but there was an awareness of it. A month earlier they had shared hotel rooms, confessions, fears, and mistakes. They had seen versions of each other that had never appeared in twenty years of friendship.

Now they were back on familiar ground, trying to figure out what that meant.

It was Rajesh who finally broke the silence.

"Now there's no passports to worry about, no police chasing us, and definitely no ping-pong shows."

A smile crept across his face as he said it.

The others laughed immediately. Not because the joke was particularly brilliant, but because the tension needed somewhere to go.

Ankit shook his head and took a sip of tea.

"And no Namwan."

This time the laughter came more easily. Even Rajesh nearly spilled his chai.

For a brief moment, the heaviness that had followed them from Bangkok seemed to lift.

Ankit laughed along with them. A month ago he would have flinched at the mention of her name. He would have changed the subject or hidden behind a joke. Now he simply smiled.

The confusion hadn't disappeared, neither had the questions. But the panic had softened.

Namwan no longer felt like a secret threatening to destroy him. She felt like a chapter he was still trying to understand.

As the laughter faded, Sandeep turned towards Amit.

"You look different."

Amit looked at him over the rim of his cup.

"That's because I've become old."

"No," Sandeep said quietly. "I mean really *different*."

Amit didn't answer immediately.

His gaze drifted towards a group of children playing nearby. One boy had fallen while running and another immediately reached down to pull him back to his feet. Something about the sight held Amit's attention longer than it should have.

Perhaps because it reminded him of his daughter. These days almost everything did.

Finally he looked back at the group.

"Separated," he said. "That's the look."

The word landed heavily. Nobody laughed at his attempt to joke.

The reality of Amit's situation had always existed between them, but hearing him say it so plainly made it impossible to avoid.

Ankit shifted slightly.

"You okay?"

The question sounded inadequate even as he asked it. Amit understood that. They all did because there was no simple answer.

For a few moments Amit stared into his tea.

"I'm still figuring it out."

His voice carried a weariness that had nothing to do with work or lack of sleep. It was the exhaustion of a man who had spent months questioning every decision he had made.

Then he added quietly,

"I'm still talking to Lila, by the way."

Three heads turned towards him. The look on their face clearly said they were surprised.

Amit noticed their expressions and smiled faintly.

"It's not romantic."

He paused, searching for words. Explaining Lila had always been difficult because what she represented couldn't easily be defined.

They just talked. Sometimes for ten minutes that stretched for an hour. There was no drama attached to it. No longing or fantasy unlike what he had shared with Ananya.

Just a strange sense of calm.

"When I talk to her," he said eventually, "everything slows down. I don't know how else to explain it. For a little while, my head stops fighting with itself."

The others remained quiet perhaps because they understood. Maybe not the details but the feeling behind it.

The desperate relief of finding something that brought peace after months of chaos.

Amit smiled to himself.

"It's funny. I spent so much time chasing excitement. Turns out peace feels a lot more valuable."

The conversation deepened after that. It was not deliberate. The shift simply happened.

Maybe Bangkok had removed too many filters. Or maybe they were all tired of pretending.

For years their friendships had revolved around work complaints, sports, politics, and harmless nonsense. Important conversations had always been avoided or disguised as jokes. Now there seemed little point in hiding.

Sandeep surprised everyone first. He stared into his tea before speaking.

"I haven't touched alcohol since the trip."

Rajesh nearly choked.

"You're lying."

"I'm serious."

"No chance."

Sandeep laughed.

"See? This is exactly why I didn't tell you."

The others watched him carefully. The admission seemed genuine.

"I wanted to feel clear for a while," he admitted. "The trip made me realize how often I hide behind distractions,

drinks, jokes, and noise. I wanted to know what was left when all that disappeared."

Nobody mocked him. A few months ago they probably would have but not anymore.

Rajesh surprised them next.

"My wife made me start therapy."

This earned immediate attention.

Ankit looked genuinely shocked.

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"What happened?"

Rajesh groaned dramatically.

"First session and the therapist tells me I joke too much."

That finally drew laughter.

"You and therapy?" Ankit said. "Impossible."

"Exactly. That's what I told her."

The laughter continued, but beneath it was something else. For all his humour and bravado, Rajesh had changed too. The casino raid had left a mark and the fear he had felt that night hadn't completely disappeared. For the first time in his life, he seemed willing to acknowledge that recklessness had consequences.

Ankit remained quiet longer than everyone else.

When he finally spoke, his voice was softer.

"I still haven't told my wife."

Nobody needed clarification. They knew exactly what he meant.

The breeze moved gently through the neem trees overhead. Children continued playing nearby, blissfully unaware of the complicated lives unfolding on the bench beside them.

Ankit looked down at his hands.

"I've started writing things down."

"A diary?" Rajesh asked.

"A journal."

Rajesh nodded solemnly.

"Diary with better marketing."

This time even Amit laughed.

Ankit shook his head.

"I don't know what I am."

The words came slowly and almost carefully.

"I don't know if I'm confused, curious or something else. But I'm done pretending none of it happened."

Nobody rushed to give advice or judge him. They simply listened. Because friendship sometimes meant accepting that answers weren't immediately available.

As the evening stretched on, the conversation slowed. They sat watching the sunlight gradually fade behind the trees.

Somewhere during that silence, they all arrived at the same realization.

The trips had never really been about Goa or Bangkok for that matter.

Those places had simply created the conditions. The real explosions had happened inside them.

The flights, the bars, the women, the adventures—those had merely exposed things that already existed beneath the surface, things they had spent years avoiding.

Sandeep was the one who finally voiced it.

"Maybe we don't need to escape anymore."

Rajesh snorted instantly.

"Says the man who Googled Pattaya nightlife last week."

The laughter returned. This time loud and genuine. It felt good not because everything was fixed but because nothing was.

Amit was still separated.

Ankit was still searching for answers.

Sandeep was still figuring himself out.

Rajesh was still Rajesh.

But something had changed.

They were no longer pretending.

As the park lights flickered on and families began heading home, the four friends slowly rose from the bench.

Just then Rajesh's phone buzzed. A grin spread across his face.

The others immediately looked suspicious.

"Boys," he announced, holding up the screen.

"The calendar whispered."

The collective groan arrived before he even finished.

"Bali."

Sandeep laughed.

"You are addicted to planning sin."

Rajesh considered it seriously.

"Maybe."

Then his expression softened.

"But maybe this time we do it differently."

He paused.

"Maybe even with families."

Amit rolled his eyes.

"That's not an escape. That's a picnic."

The others laughed.

Ankit lifted his empty cup.

"To breaking."

Amit raised his own.

"To healing."

Sandeep joined them.

"To figuring things out."

Rajesh grinned.

"And to pretending we'll never do something stupid again."

The cups touched lightly. The evening sky had turned orange and gold above them. For a moment they stood there together, older than they had been a month ago and somehow lighter despite everything they carried.

What happened in Bangkok had not stayed in Bangkok.

The mistakes hadn't, the lessons hadn't, and the questions certainly hadn't.

Those things had followed them home and taken up residence in their everyday lives.

Yet perhaps that was the point.

Perhaps some journeys aren't meant to remain where they happen.

Perhaps their purpose is to return with you, forcing you to confront parts of yourself you would otherwise spend a lifetime avoiding.

The four friends walked out of the park together, disappearing into the ordinary rhythm of evening.

None of them had all the answers.

But for the first time in a long while, they seemed willing to live with the questions.

Epilogue: The Calendar Whispered Vietnam

It was one of those lazy afternoons on a Sunday when everybody had apparently agreed to move slowly in their lives.

Ankit was lounging on his sofa with the TV blaring in the backdrop. But he was not really paying attention to it. It had been on for about twenty minutes and Ankit could not make out anything from the episode. His mobile started buzzing on the table next to him.

He picked it up absent-mindedly.

The moment he saw the sender's name, he smiled. Some people never changed.

Rajesh: *Ever heard of Bui Vien Street in Ho Chi Minh City?*

Ankit was staring at the message for some time and then chuckled to himself.

One month.

It had only been one month since Bangkok.

One month since the lounges at airports and late night flights. One month since police sirens, bad judgments, uncomfortable admissions, hangovers, and talks which were more sincere than any of those they had had in years.

A month since all of them had returned home carrying things they still hadn't fully unpacked. And Rajesh was already shopping for the next disaster.

His fingers moved across the screen.

Ankit: *Already planning our next downfall?*

The reply came almost immediately.

Sandeep: *Thought we agreed that there will be no more escapes.*

Amit's message appeared next.

Amit: *Is Vietnam even safe?*

That made Ankit laugh harder. It was such an Amit question.

Not because Amit had suddenly become cautious. If anything, Bangkok had proved how reckless people could become when they were hurting. There was however, something in Amit now that wasn't there before. Something silent. It wasn't sadness. Not quite.

It was the expression on someone who knew that not all scars heal perfectly.

Rajesh, being Rajesh, of course, paid no heed to the question at all.

Rajesh: *Safe is boring. And come on... it's Vietnam. French architecture, Vietnamese coffee, affordable massages and history. Lots of culture, boys.*

Ankit shook his head. He could picture Rajesh typing that with complete sincerity.

The guy was gifted. Every wrong move somehow seemed like an education in itself with Rajesh's interpretation of it.

After that, the conversation just went into a pause. No uncomfortable pause like during a fight.

No, it was the kind of pause that happens when people are thinking about something which they themselves know they should not be doing.

Ankit kept the phone aside and stared up at the ceiling.

For reasons he couldn't explain, his thoughts drifted back to Bangkok.

Not to the clubs or to the drinks.

Not even to the casino raid that had nearly ended their holiday before it was supposed to.

His mind went somewhere else. To a small apartment lit by purple lights. To conversations that had lasted long after the excitement had faded.

To *Namwan*.

Even now, weeks later, the memory sat uneasily inside him. Not because he regretted it. No, far from it and that was what confused him the most.

If he regretted it, life would have been simpler.

Regret came with instructions. Regret told you what not to do again.

What haunted him was the absence of regret.

There were moments when he convinced himself that Bangkok had simply been Bangkok. A strange city. Strange circumstances. Too much alcohol. Too many emotions.

Then he would remember her laugh. The way she listened when he spoke. The way he had felt seen rather than judged.

And suddenly none of the easy explanations felt convincing anymore.

He reached for his phone again.

The chat had become active.

Sandeep was arguing with Rajesh.

Rajesh was sending screenshots of hotels.

Amit had somehow become invested enough to start discussing school holiday schedules.

Ankit smiled despite himself.

Across the city, four grown men with responsibilities, mortgages, children, complicated marriages, and aching backs were once again behaving like university students planning an illegal road trip.

It should have felt ridiculous. Instead, it felt familiar. Comforting, even.

The older he got, the more he realised how rare friendship actually was.

The kind that survived mistakes and disappointments.

The kind that remained standing after people had seen the ugliest versions of each other.

Bangkok should have fractured them. In some ways it had.

The trip had exposed insecurities none of them had intended to reveal. It had dragged secrets into daylight. It had forced conversations that would have been easier to avoid.

Yet somehow, after all of that, they seemed closer. Not because they understood one another perfectly but because they finally understood that none of them had everything figured out.

Not Rajesh with his confidence.

Not Sandeep with his jokes.

Not Amit with his longing.

Not Ankit with his questions.

The realization should have been depressing. Instead, it felt strangely liberating.

The phone buzzed again.

Amit: *Let me check school holiday dates.*

Ankit laughed out loud.

That was all the answer Rajesh needed.

The group was alive in no time at all.

Suggestions for flight came along, and then the debate started. Budgets were discussed.

Rajesh had nothing to say about budgets. According to Sandeep, he wanted to make everyone bankrupt.

Questions from Amit remained unanswered.

The discussion spiralled down just as it always would.

Out there, the light of the late afternoon was gradually vanishing over the city.

Within the group chat, however, Vietnam was starting to form itself.

It wasn't a place. Not at that point, anyway.

At least for now, it was simply an idea. An idea on a screen, a joke that could become a plan, a plan that could become a reality.

And a ticket that might once again change more than any of them intended.

Ankit looked at the messages appearing one after another and felt something warm settle quietly inside his chest.

Life was still messy.

Most of the questions Bangkok had raised remained unanswered.

Tomorrow those questions would still be waiting. But for the moment, none of that seemed urgent.

His phone buzzed one final time.

Rajesh: *Ho Chi Minh. December. Start prepping your alibis, losers.*

Ankit stared at the message, smiling helplessly.

Then he typed three words.

Here we go.

And somehow, reading those words on the screen, he knew every one of them was already halfway there.